

This story is being re-written as I was not happy with it, and so I will repost it chapter by chapter as I work through it and make the changes I think are necessary. Some changes will be small, and others more sweeping. This will also give me the chance to correct my grammatical boo boos!

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Chapter 1: Alone in the World

31 December 1926

Merope Riddle had screamed out in pain as she had pushed forth her son from her body, but even that was not enough to stop her wanting to hold him as soon as the doctor and midwife had helped her deliver him. "Let me see him."

The nurse handed the baby to her after cleaning him. "What are you going to call him?"

"Tom Marvolo Riddle." Merope sighed happily at the pretty features her son already seemed to possess despite his squashed and reddened face. "After his father."

"She's bleeding." One of the other nurses noted a large red stain beginning to mushroom over the white sheet that Merope was lying upon.

Taking the baby from Merope, the medical team began to work to save her. An hour later, baby Tom was alone in the world.

1 September 1938

Tom Riddle sat down on the stool when Professor Dumbledore called his name. Unlike the other children, however, he did not jump when the battered hat, called the Sorting Hat, had spoken to him in his head, and instead he had merely responded to its question as to his aspirations. "I'm going to be the greatest wizard ever."

The Hat had not needed much time to settle on the house the determined young boy needed to go into. "SLYTHERIN!"

Tom took his place at the table next to some of the children who had already been sorted: Abraxas Malfoy, David Nott, Frederick Mulciber and Selena Gregory. They were joined thereafter by Algernon Rookwood and Belvoir Rosier. Tom nodded politely at them and then turned his attention back to Dippet's speech.

10 June 1943

Tom stood in front of the second porcelain white sink in the girls' bathroom and hissed at it. After a short time, upon hearing a noise in the tunnel below, he turned his back on the basilisk he knew would come forth.

Having sealed the bathroom and believing himself to be alone, Tom was therefore surprised when a cubicle door opened, and a bespectacled girl he recognized as a Ravenclaw, Myrtle Seaton, stepped out. She started to make a demand of him. "Go..."

Her words were cut off as the basilisk reared its head out of the chasm behind Tom, and the girl met its deadly gaze. As her body hit the floor, Tom made a snap decision, and hissed at the basilisk. "Return."

As the basilisk retreated, Tom stood over the girl. "Efferio Animus."

A silvery light appeared around the girl, and Tom knelt down by her, casting a second spell. "Auferio Pectus." Myrtle's heart was ripped out of her body and flew into the air and hovered in front of Tom.

Opening up his book bag, Tom withdrew a diary he had bought to record his thoughts in, and he touched his wand to it. "Ratis Animus Tom Marvolo Riddle." As the last syllable of the spell was spoken, Tom collapsed to the floor, screaming in agony as white hot pain lanced through his body and a black splinter of matter was spewed out from his mouth. It enfolded the silvery light before devouring the heart and vanishing inside of the diary. Tom panted heavily as he tiredly pulled himself to his knees, picked up the diary, and placed it back in his book bag.

As he struggled up onto his feet, he hissed 'close' at the sink, and all evidence of the entrance to the Chamber vanished. Glancing down at the girl, Tom decided to leave the gaping and bloody hole that

had once been her chest. It would serve him better in what he had planned to cover his tracks.

30 June 1943

Albus Dumbledore found himself contemplating the young man standing in front of him. "That was quite a service you've done for the school by tracking down the culprit behind Miss Seaton's attack, Mr. Riddle."

"I was just doing my duty, Professor." Tom hid the smile that threatened to break free as he thought about how his idea of duty differed from that of the man in front of him.

"I suppose you were." Albus met the young man's eyes, and he suppressed a shiver that was trying to go through him. "Headmaster Dippet will speak to you on his return from the Ministry. You may go."

"Thank you, Professor." The moment he had turned his back on his Transfiguration teacher, the smile Tom had been holding back escaped. He was aware that Dumbledore did not trust him, no matter how congenial the man appeared to be.

Sitting in his office, Albus sat stroking his short, reddish beard. He did not know how he knew, but he was almost certain that the young man who had just left the room had had something to do with Myrtle's death. Then he shook his head. He did not want to believe that someone of Tom's tender years could have wreaked such havoc on a young woman, who for the most part, had been a pleasant if uninspiring girl.

Dumbledore sighed. Despite what Tom Riddle had uncovered, Dumbledore could also not bring himself to believe that Hagrid had meant any harm, but he knew that at that moment the Headmaster was overseeing the snapping of Hagrid's wand at the Ministry of Magic, meaning Hagrid's expulsion from Hogwarts. Since he knew the half-giant had nowhere else to go, Dumbledore decided to make a plea on Hagrid's behalf that he should be allowed to stay, and that the half-giant become apprenticed under Ogg, the current groundskeeper.

14 July 1943

Tom's lip curled up as he surveyed the horrified looks on his father's and grandparents' faces as he revealed who he was. "And because of you, my mother died alone in a filthy Muggle hospital." Tom withdrew his wand. "And now you're all going to pay for it, starting with my disgusting Muggle father."

The elder Riddles' faces were filled with horror as a green light flew forth from the stick that the young man, who looked so much like their son, was holding in his hand, all evidence of life leaving their son moments later. The looks of horror were forever ingrained on their faces as Tom then dispatched them both in quick succession, neither having a chance to flee.

Tom subsequently turned to leave, only to hesitate and turn back. "Do excuse me. I do believe I'm forgetting my manners. It was a pleasure to meet all of you." Tom smirked. "Well, maybe I should rephrase my statement. It was a pleasure to kill all of you."

Even though his final words had gone unheard by the three corpses, Tom felt so much better for having said them. He then vanished, leaving the bodies to mystify the village, and to provide them with plenty of fodder for their Muggle gossip for years to come.

1 September 1944

Tom made his way down the train and opened the door to the carriage where five of his 'friends' were seated. "Good morning. Where is Selena?"

"Sitting with her boyfriend." Abraxas had no idea what the girl saw in Macallister Jameson, a Ravenclaw. "She said she'll see us later. We were beginning to wonder if you'd missed the train."

Belvoir noticed Tom's badge at that moment. "Head boy?"

Tom smirked. "What can I say? After my courageous efforts last year in tracking down Myrtle Seaton's deadly assassin, I'm Dippet's golden boy." He glanced around the carriage's occupants and noticed that no-one was wearing a prefect's badge. "I wonder who Slughorn got to replace me."

"Perhaps it's Selena." Abraxas knew the Potions Master had a soft spot for the girl.

"I'll find out." Tom then hesitated instead of leaving. "Meet me in the usual place tomorrow night at midnight. We have things to discuss." Not giving anyone a chance to respond, he then headed out of the carriage and down the corridor where, after checking with Selena, he found that she had been promoted to his spot; Slughorn making the unprecedented move of having two female seventh year prefects. Tom had a feeling that it was because both girls had excellent connections, and Slughorn still had Tom to call on.

22nd March 1964

Selena sat up in bed, and brought up a subject she was not entirely certain that Tom was going to take well. "Tom, darling. I was thinking about the name you call your followers."

Tom also sat up and kissed Selena's shoulder. "What of it?"

"Don't you think that 'The Knights of Walpurgis' is a little too feeble?" Selena asked tentatively. "It's hardly going to strike fear into the hearts of others when you finally show the wizarding world your true strength." She then played up to Tom's vanity. "...unlike the name of Lord Voldemort."

Tom had crafted the name using an anagram of his own name while still at Hogwarts, and he preferred it to his birth name; only Selena was allowed to call him Tom anymore. "I expect you have an alternative for me, don't you?"

"I was thinking of something along the lines of Bringers of Death and Destruction." Selena had not quite settled on something suitable. "But it is a bit of a mouthful."

Tom stroked her back. "So what else would you suggest?"

Selena thought about it. "You want a name that will inspire dread in others, a name that that will have them eating their hearts out in fear as they contemplate their own death."

Tom pondered what Selena had said, before coming up with his own suggestion. "How about Death Eaters?"

Selena debated the name. "I think it sounds perfect. How is the mask coming along?"

"I'm not going to wear one." Tom had debated wearing a gold mask as part of his outfit but he had changed his mind. "Only my followers will wear white."

"What about the Inner Circle?" Selena asked. "Are you going with the silver masks I suggested?"

Tom nodded. "Yes, but it's going to be difficult to pick out the four I consider worthy of wearing them."

"Go with all seven of us then," Selena suggested as she ran a finger over the tiny black mark on her ankle that looked like a magical tattoo of a snake and skull. "Lives are bound to be lost."

Tom grabbed Selena's hair so that she was forced to look at him. "You really are a nasty piece of work, aren't you?"

"That's why you keep me around," Selena reminded him, completely unfazed by his treatment of her hair. "And why I'm here in your bed."

"And that's where you'll be staying so long as you never do anything to piss me off." Tom kissed her roughly as he used his other hand to cup her breast.

"You know I'd never do that," Selena gasped out as Tom's hand travelled lower down her body.

"That's only because you know what I'd do to you if you did." Tom rolled on top of her. "You're mine, Selena."

As he began to make love to her, Selena stared up into the possessive face of the man she wished she had married instead of her husband, and her mind wandered slightly as she thought about how Tom had once looked.

Because Tom's appearance had started to deteriorate after the second time he had split his soul, he had chosen to wear a glamour in public, something he dropped when they were alone. It did not bother Selena, however, and she knew that he intended to carry out

a ritual that would restore him to his former healthy self once he had completed his sixth and final split. Her mind was brought back to the present as Tom coaxed the response he wanted from her and she cried out, before he did the same.

As the two lay together afterward, Selena wondered what the future held for them.

3rd February 1969

Selena gasped out loud as the door to her bedroom flew open. "Oh Merlin!"

"Oh Merlin indeed." Tom's face was filled with anger. "You cheating whore!"

The naked man next to Selena attempted to grab his wand. His motion was short-lived as Tom killed him without ceremony. Selena backed up against the headboard. "This isn't what it seems."

"You're both naked in bed," Tom responded coldly. "Tell me what I'm supposed to believe it seems."

"It was just this once." Selena clung to the sheet as if it would give her some sort of protection against the black cloaked man, who stood brandishing his wand in front of her. "You weren't supposed to be here. You wouldn't have known."

"You'd be surprised at what I know." Tom turned and put his hand on the door handle. "And I warned you what I'd do if you ever betrayed me, Selena."

"No, Tom, please. No!" Selena's screams were cut off as the door closed.

31st October 1981

Voldemort stood in front of Godric's Hollow. "Wormtail, you will remain here. Acerbus, you're with me."

Inside Godric Cottage, James Potter made a valiant effort to try and save his family, but less than ten minutes later, lying among the

ruddle that had once been his home, little Harry Potter was left alone in the world.

Next Chapter: Harry discovers his heritage

Chapter 2: Harry, You're a Wizard

23rd June 1991

Harry Potter was a well mannered but insecure little boy who lived with his Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon, and his cousin, Dudley. Harry did not know why, but his relatives did not like him, and no matter how hard he tried to please them, nothing seemed to work. So Harry had long resigned himself to the fact that he could do little except grin and bear it, or, as was quite often the case, cry and bear it.

It was a bright summer morning when he opened the door to his room, a tiny and dingy cupboard under the stairs, and peered out. After making sure that his cousin was nowhere to be seen, Harry sidled up to the front door, keeping his eyes peeled for Dudley as he picked up the post from the big brown welcome mat. His Uncle's voice suddenly boomed out from the kitchen. "Is that you, boy?"

Harry decided that he had not been quiet enough. "Yes, Uncle Vernon."

"Fetch the post!" Vernon demanded.

Harry was by then looking through the post. He did not know why he bothered to look through the small pile of post in his hand because nothing ever arrived for him. Today, however, was very different. Harry's eyes widened in shock as he found a letter addressed to him, and not only that, it was addressed to his cupboard. Slipping the letter inside of his oversized custard yellow shirt, an old and raggedy cast-off of Dudley's, Harry hurried to take the remaining post to his Uncle. "Here it is, Sir."

"Be quicker next time, boy." Vernon only ever called Harry 'boy'.

"Yes, Sir." Harry was then spun around, a firm hand gripping his shoulder, and he addressed the bony, blonde owner of the hand. "What do you need me to do, Aunt Petunia?"

Petunia Dursley had never liked Harry, not even as a baby. She had only agreed to take him in because she and Vernon had been offered a substantive sum of money to keep her nephew; money she had spent paying off the mortgage on the house and on her own son, figuring that Harry should be grateful he even had a roof over his

head. "I've cooked breakfast already, so you can empty the dishwasher, reload it, make some more tea and coffee, and then wipe down the countertops, and scrub the floors."

"Yes, Aunt Petunia." Harry hastened to empty the dishwasher, only to draw to a halt when Petunia made a demand of him. "First, take Dudley his breakfast in bed. It's his birthday, and he deserves a treat before I take him shopping."

Harry kept his face clear of his true feelings about what Dudley deserved. Instead, he picked up a tray, placed a knife and fork on it, and he then began loading up a plate with bacon, eggs, baked beans, sausages, tomatoes, and mushrooms, before adding that to the tray.

His aunt then placed a large mug of tea and a plate stacked high with hot buttered toast onto the tray as well. "Now take that up before it gets cold. And ask Dudley if he needs you to do anything for him."

"Yes, Aunt Petunia." Harry lifted the heavy tray and carefully made his way upstairs to Dudley's room. Placing the tray on the side table outside of Dudley's room, Harry knocked, and upon hearing a grunt, he opened the door, and after picking up the tray he went inside. "I have your breakfast, Dudley."

"It's about time, Potter." Dudley was sitting up in bed, playing a video game. "I'm starving."

Harry refrained from saying that Dudley could probably have lived off his fat reserves for quite some time, and so instead he placed the tray across Dudley's lap. "Aunt Petunia said to ask if you needed anything."

"I don't want you touching anything of mine, Potter," Dudley barked out and he then began to cram bacon into his mouth, using his fingers rather than the knife and fork that Harry had placed on the tray. "Get out."

Harry left and hurried back downstairs, receiving a scolding from Petunia for taking so long. He was grateful when, an hour later, the house was silent, Vernon having left for work, and Petunia having taken Dudley shopping for yet more presents to add to the massive

pile that the boy already had waiting for him to open. Now that he was finally alone, Harry withdrew the letter from his shirt, and, with trembling fingers, he used a kitchen knife to slice through the seal and open the letter. After reading what was written inside, Harry shook his head in dismay. "As if I'd fall for that." Harry then crumpled the letter up and threw it into the trash, believing it to be a joke of Dudley's.

Harry repeated the same action when more letters appeared, some in strange places, such as the refrigerator door, or partway through the cat flap. Harry wanted to confront his much bigger cousin and tell him to stop, but he knew that he would just get a beating if he did, so Harry continued to ignore the letters, throwing them into the trash each time he found a new one. After two weeks, the letters stopped appearing, and Harry just presumed that Dudley had gotten tired of trying to wind him up.

Harry was shortly about to find out how wrong he had been.

16 August 1991

Harry heard a knock at the door. "Do you want me to answer it, Aunt Petunia?"

"No, I want you stand there like a gawping duck," Petunia snapped. "Of course I want you to get the door. You do precious little else around here."

Harry hurried to open the door, and he was a little taken aback at the sight of the strangely dressed man standing there. What surprised Harry the most though, was the fact that the man was wearing what appeared to be a bright purple dress covered in stars and moons. Not only that, he also had the longest beard Harry had ever seen. Pulling himself together, Harry met the man's gaze. "Can I help you?"

"Is your Aunt in?" The man made it evident that he knew that Harry was not the son of the house owner.

"Aunt Petunia, there's a man at the door for you," Harry called out behind him.

"Ask him what he wants," Petunia called back, unwilling to get up from watching her favorite afternoon soap.

"Tell her it's about your education." The man saved Harry from having to repeat his Aunt's words.

"Aunt Petunia, it's about my education," Harry yelled again.

Petunia got to her feet, grumbling. "You'd better not be in trouble." As she reached the hallway and spotted the person at the door, she paled. "What are you doing here?"

"May I come in?" The man looked around him. "Or we could simply talk here."

Petunia had no intention of her neighbors gossiping about the strange man on her doorstep. "I suppose you'd better come in. Harry, go outside."

"But it's raining," the man pointed out as he closed the door behind him, trapping Harry inside. "And I believe that Harry should stay for our conversation. After all, it concerns him."

Petunia was not letting this man into her beloved sitting room. "Let's go into the kitchen."

Once in the kitchen, the man winked at Harry and waved his wand, a tea set and steaming teapot appearing on the countertop. "Would you like some tea?"

"No." Petunia's look of disgust displayed her feelings about the proffered beverage. "And neither does he."

"I think Harry should be allowed to decide for himself." The man turned to Harry. "Would you like a cup of tea, Harry?"

"No, thank you, Sir." Harry was still reeling from what he had just seen, and he queried the act. "Are you a magician, Sir?"

"In a manner of speaking." The man ignored Petunia's snort, and he turned his full attention on Harry. "My name is Albus Dumbledore, and I'm the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry."

Harry remembered that that was the name of the school on the envelopes he had been throwing away. "But I thought that Dudley sent those letters for a joke."

"They were no joke, Harry," Albus said gently. "Harry, you're a wizard, and the letters you've been receiving were sent by my deputy head, Professor McGonagall. We were getting a little worried when you didn't respond."

"He's not going to Hogwarts." Petunia had finally found her voice again. "He's going to Stonewall Academy."

Harry wanted to ask how his aunt knew about Hogwarts, and more shockingly, that she did not seem surprised to learn that Harry was a wizard. However, afraid of his aunt, Harry said nothing as Albus' voice lost its gentle tone, and his face became far from friendly as he refuted Petunia's claim. "Harry's name has been down at Hogwarts since he was a baby, and he will be starting in September. And I expect him to be on the Hogwarts Express on September 1st, along with his new classmates."

Petunia swallowed hard at a tone that brooked no argument. She was only too well aware of whom this man was, and what he was capable of but she still felt the need to thwart him. "We won't pay for his education."

"Harry's education has already been taken care of." Albus did not, however, go into further details. "And I will be taking him to purchase his school supplies today."

Harry knew only too well, without Petunia needing to point out that she and her husband would not be paying for anything for him, that he would be unable to pay for supplies. "But I don't have any money."

Albus did not reveal that Harry had money of his own as he knew that Petunia would try and get her hands on it if he did. And rather than lying outright, he revealed the existence of a trust account that had been put in place when the school had first been established. "There's a fund that has been set up for children who are financially disadvantaged."

"Good! Because I've already paid good money for Harry's uniform, and I'm not paying again." Petunia was lying. She had simply shrunk and dyed grey the red uniforms she had bought for Dudley for his new school. He was to attend Smeltings, a private school, rather than Stonewall, but he had already outgrown the uniforms that Petunia had bought three months earlier in preparation for the start of term in September, and she had refused to let them go to waste.

"Harry, perhaps you should fetch your coat," Albus instructed Harry, wanting him out of the room. "I need to speak to your Aunt."

"Yes, Sir." Harry turned and headed off to his cupboard to get the massive and threadbare coat, which served as Harry's protection against the weather, both during the summer and the winter.

Albus scowled at Petunia, knowing only too well that Harry would bear the brunt of his interference if he said nothing. "If I hear that you have taken this out on Harry after I return him, then you will be very sorry, Petunia."

"You should be glad we took the little brat in." Petunia did not bother to hide her hatred of Harry from this man. "He's been nothing but trouble."

"Then you should be glad that he's leaving to go to Hogwarts in September." Albus waved his wand at the tea set, causing it to disappear. "Remember what I've said. I don't want to have to come back here again to speak to you."

Petunia swallowed. "He'll be there."

"Good." Albus smiled brightly as Harry rejoined them. "Come on then, my boy. We have a little shopping to do."

Harry looked uncertainly at his aunt. "May I go, Aunt Petunia?"

"Yes." Petunia almost spat the word out. "But you'll be doing your chores when you get home."

"Yes, Aunt Petunia." Harry followed the elderly man out of the house and up the street. "The bus stop is just up here, Sir."

Albus smiled at Harry's helpfulness, and when they reached the bus stop, he held out his wand arm. "I think our bus should be here momentarily."

Harry's eyes widened as a triple-decker purple bus appeared out of nowhere. "Wow!"

"Wow, indeed, young Harry." Albus stepped onto the bus and paid the requisite fee. "We'd like to go to Diagon Alley."

"Yes, Headmaster." Stan Shunpike looked at Harry with interest, wondering who the boy was. "I'd hold on if I was you."

Harry did exactly that, his arms nearly being torn out of their sockets as the bus leapt from standing still to a speed far quicker than Harry had ever travelled at before. Harry noticed that the Headmaster barely shifted from his standing position. As Harry glanced around the bizarrely decorated bus, a chandelier shaking ominously above his head, Harry questioned the man next to him. "Sir, what is this bus?"

"This is a form of magical transportation. It's called the Knight Bus," Albus explained patiently. "There are several different other ways to travel but I thought this would be the easiest form for you this first time."

"Okay." Harry still did not really understand how the bus worked, but he fell silent until the bus stopped and he was shepherded off by Albus.

Albus led the way along the street to a dark and depressing looking building, a sign attached to it announcing that it was called 'The Leaky Cauldron'. "This is the gateway to our destination."

Harry noticed that the people walking by barely took any notice of them. "Sir, can they see us?"

"Yes, but magic makes them dismiss us and the Cauldron as figments of their imagination." Albus pushed open the door. "In we go, Harry."

After stepping into the smoky and dingy interior of the pub, Harry stuck close to Albus, feeling uncomfortable walking amongst the

strangely dressed people. He jumped when a man blocked their path. "Headmaster, I didn't expect to see you in here."

"Nor I you." Albus turned and put his arm around Harry's shoulders. "Harry, this is Professor Quirrell."

Quirrell's eyes flew to the scar on Harry's head. "Harry Potter, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"You too, Sir." Harry had no idea whether it was polite to shake hands with a wizard or not, and when Quirrell did not raise his own hand, Harry was glad he had not tried. However, his views on shaking hands went out of the window when, only moments later, Harry suddenly found himself deluged by people wanting to do exactly that.

Albus could see that the attention was overwhelming Harry, and he quickly extracted him from the crowd that had gathered. "I'm afraid that Harry has to be on his way."

The crowd respectfully parted, allowing Albus to steer Harry out of the pub, the boy's head spinning. "Sir, why did everyone seem to know me?"

"Ah." As he answered Harry, Albus tapped his wand in a random pattern on the brick wall that barred their way, and the wall subsequently parted, allowing Harry his first sight of Diagon Alley. "That is a long story, Harry."

Harry's attention, however, had been diverted from himself to the sight in front of him, and his jaw dropped open, and he repeated his comment about the bus. "Wow!"

Next chapter: Harry becomes acquainted with Diagon Alley and Hagrid, and he obtains his very first wand.

Note: For the moment this story has not changed much from the original except for minor tweaks and grammatical corrections. I'll let people know when big differences start to appear. At the moment I will try and repost 5 - 10 chapters per week until I get back to the point where I originally was, but I'm not promising to stick to that schedule as RL does occasionally intrude. And to all those who

have sent me PMs or reviewed to tell me off for taking the story down, I can only apologize yet again but I was not happy with it.

Chapter 3: Diagon Alley

Albus smiled at the 'wow' that fell from Harry's lips. "It's not like any shopping center you've seen before, is it?"

"Where are we?" Harry craned his head trying to look at everything at once. And there was so much to look at. To Harry it seemed as if he had been living in a world that was grey, and he had now stepped into a world where every color of the rainbow had been blasted onto walls, people's clothing, and even into the sky.

Albus was unsurprised by Harry's unmistakable interest. "This, my boy, is Diagon Alley, and it's where we will buy your supplies once we've been to Gringotts. And afterwards you can spend a little time exploring."

"What's Gringotts, Sir?" Harry stayed up with Albus, even though he really wanted to stop and look at everything, but as Albus had promised him he could explore on their return, he dutifully kept going.

"It's where your money is kept." Albus stopped once they reached the doors of a pristine white building, and he then admitted something to Harry. "Harry, before we go in, I want you to know that I wasn't entirely truthful with your Aunt. You will be paying for your own supplies with money taken from an account you have here."

Harry was a little surprised to hear that he had money. "Why do I have an account?"

"It's a trust fund that your parents established for you when you were born." As Albus walked forward, the doors magically opened to reveal the interior of the business.

Yet again Harry's mouth fell open, this time it was at the sight of the goblins manning the teller desks that stretched along either side of the interior, a marble floor dividing them. "What are those creatures, Sir?"

Albus could see that Harry was a little alarmed by the sight of the strange beings. "They are goblins, Harry, and they look after the wizarding world's monetary affairs. They're very clever, completely scrupulous, and loathe cheats and thieves." By the time Albus finished speaking, they had reached a goblin whose name plaque

declared him to be Tarnok. "Good day, Tarnok. I would like to make a withdrawal from Harry Potter's account."

The goblin barely spared Albus a glance, his tone bored. "Key?"

Albus withdrew a long chain from his robes and pulled off a key. "Here we are."

"Diplok, take the Supreme Mugwump and Harry Potter to their destination," Tarnok called out.

Harry again stuck close to Albus as the two of them were led to a tunnel where a rickety looking cart stood waiting. Diplok made a demand. "Get in." The two hurried to get into the cart, and before Harry could draw breath, the cart shot forward into the dark depths of the tunnel mouth in front of them.

Never having been to an amusement park, Harry had nothing to compare the cart ride to, but his face was bright with excitement and enjoyment as the cart hurtled along the tracks, before coming to a stop outside of a door which was numbered 687.

"Key please," Diplok called out.

Albus handed over the key as he climbed out, and he then indicated that Harry should also climb out. Harry's chin was once again on his chest as he observed the piles of money that lay on the floor of the vault as Diplok opened the door. "Is that really all mine?"

"This is just your trust fund." Albus handed Harry a small soft black velvet bag. "The Potter family wealth resides in a vault much deeper than this one."

"You mean I'm rich?" Harry's voice, as well as his hands, shook as he put strange shaped and colored coins into the bag.

Albus confirmed Harry's question, as well as warning him about how long he would need to make his trust fund last. "You are. As the last living Potter, everything belongs to you, but you will not be able to access the Potter vault until you reach seventeen, so this money will have to last until then. It is also the reason why I didn't tell your aunt about your money. She is your guardian and, as such, has every

right to access both of these vaults, and she would have depleted them leaving you with nothing."

As they climbed back into the cart, the vault door being firmly shut and locked again, Harry made a generous suggestion. "Perhaps I should give her some money. She never seems to have enough to buy me anything."

Albus' mild-mannered expression contorted into a scowl. "Your aunt was paid a liberal amount of money for your upkeep when she took you in as your father left a very generous allowance for whoever was to care for you."

Harry's bighearted thoughts vanished as he considered the meager helpings of food he received once everyone else had eaten, his secondhand clothing, and his living conditions. "So why didn't she use that money so that I could have clothes that fitted or a real bed?"

Albus experienced a terrible pang of guilt at the despondent tone in Harry's voice. "Your aunt is a selfish woman, Harry, and she thought only of how she could benefit from taking you in. I therefore believe it would be in your best interests never to say anything to her about this money."

"I won't, Sir." Harry was now so caught up in his thoughts that he barely noticed the cart ride back, entirely missing a dragon that was blowing fire from its nostrils as it vainly tried to reach the group in the cart. Harry only came back to himself when the cart nearly hurtled into another cart, out of which a slightly green-faced giant of a man was climbing. "Wow!" Harry had never seen anyone that big before, not even on the television.

Albus smiled at what appeared to be Harry's favorite word of surprise. "That is Hagrid, Harry."

Hearing his name, Hagrid turned around, and his somewhat set face bloomed in a bright smile. "Got it for yeh, Headmaster Dumbledore, Sir."

Harry wondered what was in the small but badly wrapped parcel that Hagrid handed over to Dumbledore, but he knew better than to ask.

Albus slipped the parcel into his pocket. "Thank you, Hagrid. Hagrid, this is Harry Potter."

Hagrid's face broke into an even larger smile. "Yeh look just like yer Dad. But yeh've got yer Mum's eyes."

"You knew my parents, Mr. Hagrid?" Harry had never seen a picture of his parents.

"Course I did." Hagrid's face turned a little sad. "Shame."

"Hagrid, you can head back to the school." Albus dismissed the giant of a man. "I'm going to take Harry to buy his supplies."

"I'll see yeh at school, Harry." Hagrid shook hands with Harry, Harry's hand vanishing inside Hagrid's giant paw of a hand. "Perhaps yeh could come to my hut and 'ave tea."

Aware that the massive man had known his parents, Harry hurriedly agreed to his suggestion. "I'd like that, Mr. Hagrid."

"Yeh can jus' call me Hagrid." Hagrid ruffled Harry's hair and walked off.

Albus did not have to be a mind reader to know that Harry was eager to find out more about his parents. "Hagrid can tell you more about Lily and James when you go to see him, but for the moment I will tell you that your parents were some of the bravest people I've ever met."

Harry had only ever heard his aunt moan about his parents. "Aunt Petunia always said that my Dad was a drunk and a waste of space."

"James Potter rarely drank." Albus was more than a little disturbed to hear Harry's discourse. "And he was a good father to you."

"What about my Mum?" Harry asked, desperate to hear about his parents now that he had finally met someone who was not being so negative about them. "What was she like?"

"She was gentle and kind." Albus' eyes became misty as he thought about the red-headed girl who had always put others before herself,

even when they did not deserve it. "And she gave her life to save you. On the night your parents died, you received that scar."

Harry's hand went to his forehead. "Aunt Petunia never told me what happened when the car crashed, just that I was injured and received this scar."

Albus hid his anger at Harry's words. "Your parents didn't die in a car crash, Harry. They were killed by a dark wizard named Voldemort."

"In an accident?" Harry asked, wondering if his parents' deaths had been a mistake. His wondering was about to be ended by Albus.

"I'm afraid that he deliberately killed them."

Albus steered Harry towards a bright cream colored building on top of which ice-cream cones danced and twirled around, spraying into the air what appeared to be multi-colored sprinkles, which dissipated before they touched anything.

Harry ignored the magical sight as he wondered what his parents had done to deserve such a fate. "Why, Sir?"

Albus led Harry into the Ice Cream Parlor. "Let's get you something nice to eat, and we can talk about what happened if you want to. What flavor ice-cream would you like?"

Harry was at a total loss. "I've never had ice-cream before."

Albus was beginning to wonder if he had made a terrible mistake in sending Harry to live with his relatives, but he did not reveal his misgivings to Harry. "Then I suggest we try the Chocolate Volcano for you."

Once he had his treat and the two of them were seated outside in the sunshine, Harry's eyes grew wide when, as he put his silver spoon into the dish, his ice-cream bubbled up, hot fudge erupted from the top, and chopped nuts appeared around the summit of his ice-cream mound. "How does it do that?"

"Magic, Harry, magic." Albus winked at him. "Now eat up."

Distracted from thoughts of his parents, Harry savored the first bite of his ice-cream, taking delight in the smooth, rich taste of chocolate, something he rarely got to try. After half a bowl, however, he had had enough. "I'm full, thank you."

"That's quite alright," Albus assured him, before he brought up the subject of Harry's parents before Harry could. "Now onto more important matters, Harry. You deserve to know what happened to your parents. I've already told you that they were murdered but what you don't know is that I believe your mother sacrificed herself to save you."

Harry had often wondered about the woman who, up until then had been just a name, although he had had dreams about a faceless woman stroking his face and telling him she loved him. As this was something that Harry could never remember having happened while he was living with his aunt, he had guessed it had to be memories of his mother. "Why do you believe that, Sir?"

"Because Voldemort was vanquished that night after he tried to kill you." Albus knew that this did not really answer Harry's question but he also knew that Harry's attention would be diverted by what Albus had revealed.

"He tried to kill me?" Harry was shocked. "But I was only a baby."

"That didn't matter to him, Harry." Albus' face was grave. "Voldemort didn't care about age, color, or blood. If you stood up to him, then you were his enemy. And even though you were too young to do that, to him you were just another victim." Albus believed that it was too soon to tell Harry exactly why Voldemort had targeted him. "But here's where things get interesting, and why I believe your mother died for you. When Voldemort tried to kill you something went wrong, and I'm certain that the spell backfired. You did something amazing, Harry. You survived the Killing Curse. It's also the reason why those people wanted to meet you in the Leaky Cauldron."

"But lots of people must have survived him attacking them." Harry had no idea that the Killing Curse was always fatal if it made contact.

"Yes, but you're the only one to survive the Killing Curse. That's what your scar is, a remnant of an evil curse gone wrong," Albus

revealed. "And because you survived, you're known as 'The Boy Who Lived'."

Harry pulled a face. "Does everyone know who I am?"

Albus nodded. "I'm afraid so. You are as famous as You-Know-Who."

"You-Know-Who?" Harry queried.

"It's what everyone else calls Voldemort." Albus himself was not afraid to say 'Voldemort' as he had already proved, but he had decided that Harry had better be made aware of everyone else's thoughts on using the name. "He became so powerful that no-one dared to call him by his name, and they started calling him 'You-Know-Who' or 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named'. And even though he's gone now, most people are still too scared to call him Voldemort in case it somehow brings him back."

"Did he die?" Harry asked the obvious question.

Albus shook his head, wishing that that was the case. "I'm afraid not. He simply disappeared. I'm almost certain that the backlash of the failed spell destroyed Voldemort's body, but not his soul." Albus had researched old blood magic to come to this conclusion, as well as relying on intuition that Voldemort had done something terrible to protect his life. "So it's likely that he's still out there."

"But can he get me now?" Harry asked worriedly.

"No," Albus assured him. "But he is the reason why you live at your aunt's house. Because she is your mum's sister, it provides a special sort of protection for you."

"But what about when I'm at school?" Harry asked, now worried about his safety.

"You'll be protected. Apart from Gringotts, Hogwarts is one of the most secure establishments in the wizarding world," Albus again reassured Harry. "And you only have to spend two weeks every year with your aunt to top up your magical protection."

"Does that mean I could leave?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Is it really so terrible there?" Albus prodded, his earlier concerns about whether he might have made a mistake coming to the forefront.

Harry dropped his eyes. "No, Sir."

"Harry, look at me." Albus tilted Harry's chin up. "And tell me the truth."

Harry looked and sighed. "It's not so bad. I have to do a lot of chores, and I get fed at the end of the day."

"At the end of the day?" Albus queried Harry's comment.

"Yes, Sir." Harry then panicked, thinking he was going to get in trouble. "But it's okay, Sir. I don't mind."

"I might," Albus said, but he refrained from scowling, not wishing to alarm Harry anymore than he was already. "Harry, does your aunt ever smack you?"

"Only when I'm naughty," Harry answered, not being exactly truthful. "But usually she locks me in my cupboard."

"Your cupboard?" Albus questioned.

"Yes, Sir." Harry played with his spoon as he answered. "It's my room under the stairs."

Albus frowned and withdrew a letter from his pocket, not bothering to have read the address on it when he picked it up. However, he did so now. "Where do you sleep?"

"In my cupboard," Harry said it in a matter-of-fact sort of way. "I have a bed in there."

Albus clamped down on his anger, and he decided that he had better help Harry to do what they had set out to do. "Have you really had enough ice-cream?"

"Yes, thank you, Sir." Harry looked around. "Is there a bin?"

"No." Albus aimed his wand at the container and the spoon, and they disappeared. "Let's go get your supplies."

First, Albus took Harry to get his wand. "Mr. Ollivander, you can come out."

A strange and frightening-looking man with moon-like eyes appeared. "Headmaster, I see you are in illustrious company. Hello, Mr. Potter."

"Hello," Harry responded nervously, not liking the eerie eyes the man possessed.

"Harry needs a wand," Albus firmly said, before Ollivander could say anything else. "And we're in a bit of a hurry."

"It takes however long it takes." Ollivander began to search through his boxes of wands. "Let me see. Let me see."

The first wand failed, as did the next fifteen, until finally, Ollivander tapped his fingers on a box. "Let's try this one."

Harry could have sworn he saw a brief look of surprise cross Ollivander's face when that wand too failed. "Sorry, Mr. Ollivander."

"It's not your fault, Mr. Potter," Ollivander said, and he returned to searching. "The wand chooses the wizard, and not the other way around."

Five wands later, Harry found himself holding a yew wand with a chimaera scale core. As he waved it, bright silvery sparkles flew out of the end. "Does this mean that this is the right wand, Mr. Ollivander?"

"Yes." Ollivander was quite perturbed that the wand Harry was holding was not one of his. "That wand isn't actually one I made myself. It was imported as part of a batch from a dealer in North America, and the core is very rare but very powerful. It therefore looks as though you may be meant for great things, Mr. Potter."

"I don't think so. I'm just a boy." Harry placed the wand back on the counter. "How much do I owe you, Mr. Ollivander?"

"Forty galleons. I'm afraid that that wand is a bit more expensive than my standard stock." Ollivander took the volunteered cash that Albus counted out of Harry's pouch, as Albus was aware that Harry would have no idea how wizarding money worked.

After picking up his wand, Harry was then taken by Albus to a trunk supply store, where Albus told the owner that he wanted a trunk that could only be opened by its owner. He smiled at Harry. "He'll need your wand."

Harry handed over his wand, and then he watched in fascination as the shopkeeper did some interesting magic before Harry's wand was handed back over. "Thank you."

The owner then passed the trunk over. "That will be two hundred galleons."

Albus reached into his own purse, and paid. "There we go." He then tapped the trunk and it shrank to a miniscule size. "Put this in your pocket, Harry."

"How much is two hundred galleons, Sir?" Harry asked, as they left the store and headed towards the store where Harry would buy his uniforms.

"A galleon is about five pounds, Harry." As he said it, Albus could see how shocked Harry was by the price of the trunk. "The trunk was a gift from me to make up for all those birthdays of yours I missed."

"But..." Harry was almost dumbstruck, but he quickly recovered and remembered his manners. "Thank you, Sir. I've never had a proper birthday present before."

After what he had learnt so far, Albus was not surprised to hear that. "Let's get you kitted out."

In the clothing store, Harry was placed on a small stool next to a blond boy, who after glancing at Dumbledore, said nothing but smiled in a friendly manner at Harry, and before Harry knew it they had both been measured and Harry found his arms full of various pieces of clothing, which Albus helped him place into the trunk before closing it and shrinking it again.

"I think Flourish & Blotts will be next. I've already taken the liberty of purchasing the supplies you'll need for Potions," Albus informed Harry, as they left Madam Malkins and headed next door to buy Harry's school books.

The bookstore was what delighted Harry most. He liked libraries; they had deep dark corners where you could hide away, and this bookstore was no different. Harry turned to Albus. "Can I pick some other books as well as school books, please?"

"Go ahead." Albus collected Harry's books for the year, and he talked with various people until Harry came over with two small books. "Is that all you want?"

"I can have more?" Harry was a little nervous at spending too much money, given what Albus had said about making his money last.

Albus looked inside Harry's pouch, and he handed it to him. "There's plenty of money in here, Harry."

Harry slipped the pouch around his neck and headed back into the depths of the library. As he walked by a section marked 'mythical creatures' he was smiled at by a young girl. Believing her to be like everyone else and that she had recognized him, Harry gave a brief but discouraging smile, and he headed over to the section on history. He was still standing there, frowning, when the girl joined him. Harry buried his sigh and turned to face her. "Hello."

"Hello." The girl stared at Harry. "Are you looking for something special? I was looking for a book on Belly Busting Bees but I couldn't find one."

Unused to the wizarding world, Harry did not query the girl's unusual reading habits and merely told her what he was after. "I'm trying to decide on which book to buy about Hogwarts' history."

"That one." The girl pointed to the largest tome on the shelf. "But it's expensive."

Harry looked at the price, and noted that the book cost seventy galleons, and then he looked into his money pouch. "I don't know if I have enough money."

The girl guessed that Harry was unfamiliar with wizarding money. "Are you a Muggleborn?"

"What's a Muggleborn?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Someone whose parents aren't magical." The girl took the pouch from Harry, and her eyes widened. "You have lots of money in here." The girl then explained the different coins to Harry, before asking her original question again. "So are you a Muggleborn?"

Harry shook his head. "My parents were magical but I live with my aunt and uncle, and they're not magical."

"Are your parents dead then?" The girl went on before Harry could respond. "My mother died last year."

"Yes, my parents died when I was a baby, and I'm sorry about your mother." Harry felt sad that he had never known his parents but he was sadder for the young girl.

"Thank you." The girl accepted Harry's condolences. "Mummy was quite an amazing witch. She was always experimenting but then one day something went wrong. I was there but I couldn't save her." The girl sighed heavily. "But I still have Daddy."

Harry felt uncomfortable at the sad look on the girl's face, and he focused on the girl's father. "Is he here?"

"He's at the Daily Prophet, talking to them about a new press for the Quibbler," the girl informed Harry.

Harry had no idea what either the Daily Prophet or the Quibbler were. "Oh."

"Are you here with your aunt and uncle?" The girl looked around Harry to see if she could see someone who might be with him.

"No, I'm with the headmaster of my school." Harry could not remember the name of the school or that of its headmaster. He then turned around to point out the headmaster but his view of

Dumbledore was blocked by several tall shelves full of books. "He's over there somewhere."

"Is it Professor Dumbledore?" the girl asked.

Harry nodded. "Yes."

The girl studied Harry closely. "You must be important then."

Harry realized that this girl had no idea who he was. "Not really."

The girl decided to introduce herself so that Harry would hopefully give her his name in return. "I'm Luna Lovegood."

"Harry Potter." Harry waited for the excited response, but none came.

Luna merely nodded in acknowledgement. "That's nice. Daddy said you would be going to Hogwarts this year."

"Are you?" Harry asked, deciding that he quite liked the no-nonsense girl, although they had only just met.

Luna regretfully shook her head. "I'm too young but I'll be going next year."

Harry experienced a wash of disappointment. "That's too bad."

At Harry's words, Luna made a suggestion. "I know you're going to have lots of friends because of who you are but I was wondering if you'd like to be my friend." Now she had made the request, Luna also offered Harry a get-out. "But you don't have to if you don't want to."

Harry was not about to turn down an offer of friendship that did not seem to stem from his newly discovered fame. "I'd like that too. I don't have any friends."

Luna knew how that felt. "Neither do I really. Not unless you count Ginny but she only plays with me because her brothers won't play with her and her mum makes her."

Harry wondered who Ginny was. "I bet she likes playing with you."

Luna was not so sure. She had once heard Ginny whining about having to play with her, and Ginny had called her 'strange'. "Maybe." Luna returned to the topic of Harry's friendship. "So can I write to you?"

"Yes, please." Harry's answer was eager. "I'll have to buy some stamps though."

Luna had no idea what Harry was talking about. "Stamps?"

"You pay for the postage with them by sticking them on the letter," Harry explained.

"You won't need stamps. You can use my owl."

Harry was as confused by this as Luna had had been about the stamps, and so she ended up explaining about owl mail.

Harry became despondent. "I'd like an owl but Aunt Petunia would never allow anything like that in the house." Harry knew that only too well from experience, his aunt having killed a mouse that Harry had found under the kitchen sink. Harry had hidden it in his cupboard, feeding it scraps from his own meager portions, and he had named it 'Horatio'. When Petunia had spotted it, she had killed it by dropping a paint can on it, and Harry had been severely punished for harboring what Petunia had called 'dirty vermin'. Afterwards, Harry had been unable to sit down for a week.

A voice interrupted Harry's misery. "I believe we can sort something out."

Harry and Luna both turned to find Albus standing there. "Really, Sir?"

"Yes, Harry." Albus smiled at Luna. "Miss Lovegood, your father is waiting for you at the information desk. I told him I'd find you."

"Thank you, Sir." Luna was a little in awe of the Headmaster, never having met him before, but being aware of who he was from his pictures in the newspapers. She smiled at Harry. "I'll write to you."

"And I'll write back," Harry promised as Luna broke into a skipping gait and disappeared around the bookshelves.

Albus noted Harry's empty hands. "You haven't found a book yet?"

"Luna said that one is good." Harry pointed at the large tome on the shelf.

"An excellent choice." Albus lifted down the book and they both headed towards the counter, where Harry paid for his schoolbooks and his leisure reading. His purse was still quite heavy, and he enthusiastically followed Albus out and towards the next store where he discovered that, despite his misgivings, he was going to buy an owl.

Ten minutes later, Harry was the owner of a snowy-white owl. "She's beautiful, Sir." The owl rubbed her beak affectionately against Harry's cheek. "Do you think she knows what I'm saying?"

"Owls are very intelligent creatures, Harry," Albus informed him. "And I think this little lady is no different. Have you decided on a name for her yet?"

Harry had been sifting through names in his head since the moment he had laid eyes on the snowy-white owl but he been unable to settle on a specific one yet. "I learnt about a queen called Jadwiga in school. Perhaps that would be a good name."

The owl gave Harry a reproachful look, making Albus smile. "I don't think she likes that name. I've heard of Jadwiga. She was also known as Saint Hedwig."

The owl made a "kre kre" sound, and nudged Harry's cheek, making Harry smile. "I think she likes Saint Hedwig."

Albus made a suggestion. "How about just calling her Hedwig?"

The owl made another loud noise, and her name was decided upon. "Hedwig. You like that name, don't you?" Hedwig rubbed her beak against Harry's cheek once more to say yes. Harry was delighted but he did turn worried eyes to Albus. "What can I do with her when I return home?"

"I'd planned to take her with me." Albus was not surprised when the owl flew to his shoulder and rubbed her downy white head against his cheek. "She'll be well taken care of."

"Do you have an owl, Sir?" Harry asked with interest as they began to head back towards the Leaky Cauldron.

"No." Albus thought about his own familiar. "But I am friends with a phoenix called Fawkes."

Harry had only ever seen a phoenix in an old television program called 'The Phoenix and the Carpet'. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"Fawkes is a boy." Albus tapped the bricks at the wall they came to, and before Harry knew it, they were out of the pub and back in the Muggle world. A quick wand arm gesture, and the Knight Bus again returned.

Harry's happy smile began to degenerate as they got closer and closer to his home. When they got off the bus, Harry relayed his gratitude to Albus. "Thank you for coming to get me, Sir."

Albus knew what was bothering Harry. "I'm afraid that I have to take you home this time, Harry. But I will see you in two weeks' time."

Harry wanted to cry as he was delivered home. He had no idea that before he left, Albus had given Petunia yet another warning to deliver Harry for the Hogwarts Express when it left on 1st September and not to take Albus' interference out on Harry.

However, in spite of Albus' warning, for the next two weeks Harry's life was made more miserable than ever, as Petunia found the worst chores she could possibly dream up for him to carry out. She had also crammed Harry's trunk into the cupboard under the stairs, making it impossible for Harry to lie out fully at night. Harry was therefore thankful when September 1st finally dawned.

Next Chapter: Harry heads for the Hogwarts Express

Note: Again, not many changes, except for grammatical changes, and a few extra lines and words to make better sense of things.

Chapter 4: Hogwarts Bound

1st September 1991

Harry had been lying awake for most of the night, excitement that he was going to be leaving the Dursley household rendering sleep almost impossible, more so than the trunk that lay at the bottom of Harry's cot bed preventing Harry from stretching out. As soon as he heard footsteps coming down the stairs, Harry nervously got up and opened the door. He was met by the sight of his scowling aunt. "Good morning, Aunt Petunia."

Petunia did not bother to return Harry's greeting. "Get your trunk and coat."

Harry turned around and headed back into his cupboard, tugging out the trunk. Harry was glad that the Headmaster had placed a featherlight charm on it, otherwise he doubted that he would have been able to move it. Harry then picked up his coat, which lay at the top of his bed, before standing beside his trunk and waiting for Petunia to say something. When she said nothing, Harry made a suggestion. "I'd better go and get washed up."

In response, Petunia grabbed her coat from the coat stand, and then she picked up her car keys from the small table beside it. "Forget that. You're coming with me."

Having little choice, Harry followed Petunia outside to where her small yellow Japanese hatchback was standing in the driveway. After putting down the seats, Harry was able to get his trunk into the back of the car and successfully close the boot. He then sat in the passenger seat when Petunia ordered him to do so.

Petunia said nothing at all to Harry during the drive to the nearest train station. Once they had arrived, she waited for Harry to get his trunk out, before handing Harry twenty pounds and a train timetable and then hissing at him, "You can find your own way to London. I've got better things to do with my time than chauffeuring a little freak like you around. And don't think you're coming home for the holidays, because you're not."

As ever, Harry still responded politely. "I understand, Aunt Petunia."

Harry was then left standing alone outside of Redhill Train Station as Petunia promptly climbed back into her car and drove off, not once giving Harry a second glance. Harry made his way inside the station, where he was helped by the lady behind the shatterproof glass window to buy a ticket with the Muggle money that Petunia had just given him. After paying for the ticket, Harry discovered that he had over ten pounds left, and he put this into the inner pocket of the voluminous coat that he had put on to combat the early morning chill. The lady then told Harry which platform to head to, and before too long, Harry found himself on a train and pulling out of the station.

After alighting at London Bridge, Harry made his way to the Underground, and, with a little help from a kindly commuter who showed Harry how to slide his ticket into a slot so that the turnstile opened, Harry was able to get onto the platform where the tube-like train came hurtling into the station a few moments after he arrived. Ten minutes later, Harry arrived at Kings Cross. Having some time to kill, Harry went in search of breakfast, which he tucked into with gusto, not having had anything to eat for almost two days.

After taking his empty plate and cup back to the girl serving at the counter, who winked at Harry and handed him a cookie, Harry hauled his trunk behind him and headed towards the barrier. Harry had managed to find the barrier when, as he had been eating his breakfast, he had spotted several tall students seemingly disappearing into the barrier that divided platforms 9 and 10.

Soon, Harry was stood on the platform for the Hogwarts Express. When he had first reached the platform, Harry's mouth had fallen open at the sight of the bright red and extremely long Hogwarts Express, and Harry had begun to feel positive about this new world he was about to enter. Now though, he was faced with a decision as to where to sit. Harry quickly discovered that he was almost spoiled for choice, since there was virtually no-one else there, Harry having arrived two hours before the train was due to leave. Hauling his trunk up into the first compartment he found, Harry shoved it under the seat. Then, from his battered old black rucksack, another cast-off of Dudley's, Harry pulled out his book on Hogwarts and began to read. Several hours later, when the train screamed out its farewell whistle and with an almighty jolt pulled out of the station, Harry was glad to discover he was still alone. But sadly his solitude was not to last for long.

The train had barely left the station when the door to the corridor opened, revealing a blonde boy. It was the same boy that Harry had smiled at while shopping for his uniform. Only this time he was not alone; two of the ugliest boys Harry had ever seen also stood in the doorway flanking the blonde boy, who opened his mouth and asked Harry a question. "Are you Harry Potter?"

"Who wants to know?" Harry responded, acting braver than he was actually feeling.

"Draco Malfoy." Draco stepped into the carriage, now sure that this was his prey, and he nodded behind him. "That's Crabbe and Goyle."

Being a polite boy, Harry held out his hand, hoping that Draco would not fawn over him. "I didn't get the chance to introduce myself in the store. I'm Harry Potter."

Draco did not gush over Harry, and he merely shook Harry's hand before sitting down and nodding at the opposite seat. Like a couple of faithful dogs, Crabbe and Goyle also sat down. Draco noted the book that Harry was reading. "Hogwarts: A History? Haven't you read that before?"

"I bought this copy when I went to Diagon Alley with the Headmaster." Harry placed his bookmark at the page he had reached. "I thought it would help acquaint me with the school rules and the like, but I haven't had much chance to read it yet."

"So have you decided what house you would like to be in?" Draco asked, not particularly interested in the rules.

"No, but perhaps you could tell me about them." Harry replaced his book into his rucksack.

Draco immediately launched into an oration. "Slytherin is obviously the best house. My godfather, Professor Snape, is head of it. We all get private rooms; well, you have to share with one other person but it's still better than the dormitories the other houses have. If you get in you can share with me." Draco had already agreed to share with one of his childhood friends, Blaise Zabini, but after the talk he had had with his father, he now decided that his best choice would be to bunk in with Harry if the boy made it into Slytherin house.

"I'm more interested in finding a house where I can blend in rather than worrying about its' sleeping arrangements." Harry revealed what was driving his interest. "I received a lot of attention in Diagon Alley, and it was a little bit much."

"No-one in Slytherin house would care who you were." Draco was quite sure of this having spoken to his godfather about it.

"You had better tell me about the other houses though, just in case," Harry urged.

"If you don't get into Slytherin, then Ravenclaw is the next best choice," Draco said confidently. "At least if you're clever enough, it is."

"I'm reasonably clever." Harry had always done rather well in tests at school until he had had to start 'dumbing down' in order to avoid being beaten up by Dudley and starved by his relatives.

At Harry's distinctly lackluster comment, Draco decided that Harry was probably not Ravenclaw material. "The last two houses are Gryffindor, which is full of idiots who don't think before they act, and Hufflepuff." As he mentioned Hufflepuff house, Draco shuddered, and he quite incorrectly stated what he believed to be the truth about the house. "Hufflepuff is where the leftovers go when there's no room for them in one of the better houses."

Harry glanced at Crabbe and Goyle. "What house will you two be in?"

Draco answered for them. "Oh, they'll be in Slytherin. Their family has been for generations, as has my own. Yours on the other hand have usually always been in Gryffindor."

Harry thought about it for a moment. "I don't think I'd make a very good Gryffindor. Living with my relatives, I've found that I now think about things very carefully before rushing into them."

"Why?" Draco asked.

"Because they hate me, and I get punished if I do something wrong," Harry replied.

"What sort of spells do they use?" Draco had been subjected to some pretty rough ones at the hands of his father when he had stepped out of line.

"None." Harry found himself wondering what chastising spells existed as he explained about his relatives to Draco. "They're Muggles."

Draco was disgusted. "The Boy Who Lived has been living with Muggles?"

"They're my only relatives," Harry informed him. "So I didn't have much choice."

Draco decided to extract the boy from the unseemly influence of Muggles. "If you get into Slytherin, I'll ask Father if you can spend the holidays with us at Malfoy Manor."

"Thank you but I doubt my relatives would let me," Harry immediately responded.

"Father has contacts in the right places," Draco announced loftily, just as the trolley witch arrived.

After picking out what they wanted, the four boys settled down to eat, only being interrupted during the remainder of the journey by a bushy haired girl who was helping someone called Neville find his toad.

By the time they arrived at Hogwarts it was getting dark, and Harry found himself getting into a boat with Draco and an unsmiling black boy, who Draco informed Harry was named Blaise Zabini. The boats then moved forward on their way to Hogwarts.

Inside Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore watched as the first years filed into the Great Hall. He ignored the whispering about the latest intake, more particularly those whispers about the dark-haired and green-eyed boy who was currently standing in the center of the group next to Draco Malfoy.

After a battered looking hat had sung a little ditty about being friends and sticking together, one by one, the first-years were called forward

to try on the hat, which was known as the Sorting Hat. Then, finally, it was Harry's turn. Albus waited confidently for the Hat to scream out 'Gryffindor', and was stunned when it announced 'Hufflepuff' instead.

Albus had explicitly told the Hat that he wanted Harry in Gryffindor so that he would fall under Minerva's care. Now he found himself wondering what had gone on between the Hat and Harry.

A few minutes earlier

"Now which house to put you in? Most definitely not Slytherin." The Sorting Hat had immediately dismissed the house that Harry had hoped for the moment Harry had placed it on his head.

"But my new friends are in that house," Harry protested, not wanting to lose the only real friends he had ever known. He was unable to count Luna as a proper friend yet as they had only spent a few minutes talking together, and he had no idea what house she might get into.

"Quiet!" The Hat's tone was bordering on rude, as it debated the remaining options. "So what house for you will be right?"

Because the Hat had denounced Harry's first suggestion, Harry now timidly made another one. "What about Ravenclaw?"

"I'll admit you're bright but it's not for you to study day and night." The Hat liked its own rhyme, and it smirked to itself. "So let's discard Ravenclaw, and talk between us of it no more."

"If Ravenclaw is out then I want somewhere I can blend in." Harry knew though where his request would probably lead him.

"So let me see if I've got it right, you don't want to be heard or in plain sight?" the Hat asked. If Harry could have seen the Hat on his head, he would have seen the rip that acted as its mouth widen as it again grinned delightedly at itself.

"I've found it's better for me if people don't notice me. Slytherin would have been perfect. Draco said that people tend to mind their own business in that house," Harry told the Hat.

"No Slytherin, nor Gryffindor then, even though you have the right stuff, so I suppose by default it's going to have to be Hufflepuff." The Hat said the entire sentence, except for the name of the house, quietly. "Good luck, Harry Potter."

Harry took the Hat off and headed to join his new housemates. He was very unsurprised when Draco gave him a look of revulsion. Harry mumbled under his breath, "So that's the end of that friendship." He nodded politely to the others on his table, who looked delighted that they had got him, before listening to the Hat's continuing allocation of houses for the remaining students. Blaise Zabini was the final student to be sorted, and he went into Slytherin.

After dinner, Harry traipsed behind the seventh year prefects, Marjorie Banks and Henry Delaney, to a still life painting that Harry thought looked awfully boring. After going through the door, they went down a staircase and headed into a common room. From listening to the chatter at the dinner table, Harry knew that Hufflepuff house was on the dungeons level but far from being dark and dismal, the common room the first years were led into was bright and cheery, decorated in yellows and blues.

Marjorie pointed out two tunnels. "The first tunnel leads to the dormitories for the boys. The first year dormitory is the very first door on the right, and the girls' dormitory is through that tunnel there."

Harry soon discovered that the entrance to the dormitory was a perfect little round door. It instantly brought to mind the Hobbit, a book that he had read in his last year of junior school. On entering the dormitory, he discovered that the room was also circular, each bed being separated by a small wall. Harry noted that the circular shape of the room meant that each bed was equidistant to its partner. His trunk had been placed at the foot of the second bed on the left of the door, flanked by two of his housemates, Justin Finch-Fletchley and Ernest Macmillan. And a boy named Wayne Hopkins rounded out the quartet.

His closest roommate, Justin held out his hand. "Hello. I'm Justin Finch-Fletchley."

Harry shook the hand, the boy's cut-glass voice telling Harry that his roommate was obviously quite well-to-do. "Harry Potter."

Ernest glanced over at the boy, having grown up knowing his name. "You don't look anything like I expected you to." He walked over to Harry. "I'm Ernest Macmillan, Ernie."

Harry, and then Justin, shook hands with the boy. Harry thought he seemed a little stuffy. "What did you expect me to look like?"

"I don't know." Ernie had not really had a mental picture of what Harry should look like, just an idea. "Bigger, I think."

Wayne decided that he had better join the group. "I'm Wayne Hopkins. And why are you so special?" This was directed at Harry.

Ernie could hardly believe that Wayne was actually asking, and he looked at the boy as if he was stupid. "He's the Boy Who Lived."

"The what?" Wayne had paid little attention to the whispering that had been going on as he had waited to be sorted.

"He's the one who killed You-Know-Who." Ernie's parents were among those who believed that Voldemort was gone for good, but like everyone else they still had been unable to bring themselves to call the long vanquished wizard 'Voldemort', and Ernie now copied his parents by default. At Wayne's blank look, Ernie made a correct deduction. "You're a Muggleborn, aren't you?"

"You-Who? A what?" It was obvious that Wayne was not the brightest boy in the world.

"Your parents aren't magical, are they?" Ernie asked.

Wayne shook his head. "It was a surprise to get my letter and a visit from Professor McGonagall. But Mum and Dad said it at least explained all of the weird things that happened around me. Not that it had bothered them that much."

Harry resisted the temptation to rub his bottom as he thought about what his aunt had done to him when weird things had happened. "I wish I'd known earlier that I was magical."

Ernie frowned. "But you're not a Muggleborn."

"I live with my relatives who are Muggles," Harry explained for the second time that day. "I didn't find out that I was magical until the Headmaster came to take me to Diagon Alley."

Wayne eyed Harry up. "If you didn't know you were magical, how did you kill that You-Who person?"

"His name is Voldemort." Even after Albus' warning about other people's feelings about the dark wizard, and not understanding how much fear the man really had instilled into the wizarding community, Harry, having decided it was silly not to call someone by their real name, used the name no-one else would.

Ernie gasped, his face a little pale. "You said his name!"

"It's only a name." But even as he protested, Harry could see from Ernie's reaction that, just as Albus had warned him, he would have to watch what he was saying. "And I didn't kill him. He killed my parents before attacking me, and then something happened to him. I was only a baby at the time, and I didn't do anything except to survive."

Wayne eyed Harry suspiciously, not really sure if he believed that Harry had done nothing. "So you're not going to go around killing anyone else?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "No, Wayne, I'm not. I just want people to leave me alone so that I can get through school and eventually leave my relatives' house."

Losing interest, Wayne wandered off. "I'm going to brush my teeth."

Harry had the distinct feeling that Wayne was not going to become a friend.

Ernie had weighed up what Harry had said about the night he had been attacked, and so, before Harry could also turn away to start to get ready for bed, Ernie decided that Harry had to have a hand in destroying Voldemort. "You must have done something, Harry."

Harry sighed as he opened his trunk. "I didn't. I really am no-one special, Ernie."

"Okay then." Ernie was now even more disillusioned than he had been when he had first spotted Harry, and he disappeared after Wayne into the bathroom.

Justin smiled sympathetically at Harry. "I used to attend a prep school called Ludgrove, and there was a lot of royalty who attended. Just like you, they hated the attention."

"How did they deal with it?" Harry asked with interest.

"Told everyone just to treat them as they would anyone else," Justin explained, before thinking about the few who had reveled in the attention. "Well, most of them did. There were, of course, some boys who loved the attention, but you don't strike me as the type."

"I'm not." Harry's answer was fervent and immediate.

"Just so you know, I really don't care who you're supposed to be or what you've done." Justin smiled at Harry. "I'd rather just get to know you as Harry."

Harry grinned happily back at Justin. "I'd like that as well."

The two boys then rummaged through their trunks, removed their pajamas, and grabbed their toothbrushes before heading into the bathroom.

As he walked into it, Harry looked around with interest at the large cream and blue tiled bathroom, which contained four showers and washbasins as well as several toilets. After brushing his teeth, Harry climbed into his pajamas and got into bed. "Goodnight."

Ernie and Justin both echoed Harry's sentiment, Wayne's loud snoring signaling that he was already asleep. Harry hoped that Justin would be his friend, having decided he liked the taller and friendly boy. Smiling to himself he closed his eyes, and soon the dormitory was filled with only the sound of soft breathing and snoring as all four boys drifted off to sleep.

The Next Morning

Harry woke up at five o'clock, and he quietly picked out his clothes and headed into the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, he was

dressed and walking out of Hufflepuff. Remembering his way back to the Great Hall was easy, and Harry was about to go in when he was accosted by Albus Dumbledore. "Good morning, Sir."

"Good morning, Harry." Albus placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and steered him, not towards the large double doors leading into the Great Hall, but towards a small door to the left of it. "Do you mind if we have a little chat before you tuck into the wonderful breakfast that awaits you?"

Liking the Headmaster, Harry immediately shook his head. "No, Sir."

Once inside the room, which was empty except for a large wooden table and four matching chairs, Harry was urged to sit down by Albus. Albus then asked how things had gone for Harry since he had left him. "I was glad to see you made it here safely. I take it that your aunt did as I asked her and helped you to find your way."

Harry smiled at the Headmaster. "Yes, Sir. She drove me to the train station."

Albus was relieved to hear that the woman had done as he had warned her to. "Did she accompany you onto the platform and through the barrier?"

Harry realized that Albus thought that Petunia had gone to Kings Cross with him. "No, Sir. She took me to Redhill Train Station, and I caught some trains to get me to London." Harry was quite proud that he had managed alone.

"She left you alone?" Albus wanted to make sure he had understood Harry correctly.

"Yes, Sir, but she gave plenty of Muggle money and a timetable." Harry had not been bothered that Petunia had failed to accompany him all the way into London. "I was okay. People helped me when I didn't know what I was doing. And I didn't mind, Sir."

Albus did but he let the matter drop, and he moved onto another subject. "Did she hurt you at all after I left?"

"No, Sir," Harry answered a little untruthfully. "But she did give me lots of chores to do."

Albus had spotted Harry's minute hesitation, and he repeated his question, this time a little more firmly. "Harry, did your aunt punish you?"

His cheeks red, Harry again denied it. "No, Sir."

Albus called Harry on the lie. "Harry, I need to know the truth."

Under the force of Albus' gaze and words, Harry caved and dropped his head, but even as he did so, he still defended his aunt's actions. "Yes, Sir. But it was my fault. I didn't get all of the oil up from the garage floor."

"And what did she do to you for failing to do so?" Albus probed gently but firmly.

"She hit me with a mop," Harry admitted as he met the Headmaster's gaze again. "But it didn't hurt much."

"What else?" Albus refused to let the subject drop, believing there to be more.

Harry's voice became subdued. "She wouldn't let me wear my coat outside when it rained and I had to trim the bushes. But that wasn't so bad." At Albus' expectant glance, Harry found himself telling the Headmaster about his aunt's final punishment. "And she smacked me with a shoe when I didn't make it shiny enough." Harry refrained from mentioning that it had been a heeled pump.

When no more was forthcoming from Harry, Albus checked that this was everything. "Is there anything else?"

"No, Sir." This time Harry was being truthful.

"Thank you, Harry." Albus rubbed this beard, and he brought up something that had been bothering him all night, the Sorting Hat refusing to discuss Harry's sorting with him. "Harry, I expected you to be in Gryffindor. Do you know why the Hat chose Hufflepuff for you?"

"Yes, Sir." Harry nodded his head violently. "I told it I wanted to be put in a house where I could hide away. I actually wanted Slytherin so that I could be with Draco but the Hat refused."

Albus was thankful that the Hat had at least kept Harry out of that house. "Never mind, I'm sure you'll be happy in Hufflepuff."

"I think so." Harry gave a hopeful smile. "And I think I've already made a friend."

"I'm glad to hear it, my boy." Albus stood up. "You should head into breakfast. I have a few matters I need to attend to before I eat."

"Yes, Sir." Harry headed in the direction of the door and, after opening it, vanished from Albus' sight. Albus was aware that his deputy would be sorting out timetables at that time of the morning, and he hurried out after Harry to speak to her.

Next Chapter: Albus takes Petunia to task; Snape gives Harry a hard time; Harry's flying lesson doesn't go to plan.

Note: Just a few additional sentences, rearranging of words, and grammatical changes this time. I probably won't be reposting chapter 5 until after the holiday weekend, unless I get a chance to do so on Sunday.

Chapter 5: The Flying Lesson

After leaving Albus, Harry headed into the Great Hall where he noticed that despite the early hour, there were quite a few students already eating breakfast, including Justin. Sitting down next to Justin, Harry loaded his plate up with food. He then happily munched away at his bacon and sausage, delighted that he had been able to put as much food as he wanted onto his plate without fear of being shouted at for eating too much or of Dudley stealing the food off his plate. It was also a novelty for Harry to be allowed to eat so early in the day. He spoke aloud without intending to. "I wonder if breakfast is always like this."

A second year, Roger Banks, who overheard Harry, told him it was. Harry sighed happily, and he turned to Justin, who was studying the schedule that had been handed out by Professor Sprout. "What do we have first?"

"Charms with the Gryffindors." Justin read off their first day. "And Potions with the Ravenclaws this afternoon." Not wanting to have to sit with Ernie or Wayne, Justin made a request of Harry. "Will you be my partner in classes?"

Harry knew then that he had definitely found a friend. "Of course."

"Great." Even though it was far from evident from his confident manner, Justin had been worried about making a friend in his new school. And despite the mutterings about Harry, he had taken to the dark-haired boy immediately.

The two boys gathered up their things after finishing breakfast and headed for Charms. With the exception of having Ron Weasley staring openly at Harry, most people ignored him, and Harry found that by the time lunch had arrived, he had enjoyed the morning. He had particularly liked listening to the squeaky voice of the diminutive Professor Flitwick explaining the basics about Charms.

Harry should have known that all good things must come to an end, and for Harry it was going to end with Potions. As he walked into the room where the lesson was to be held, Harry looked around the dungeon room that served as the Potions classroom and he felt a shiver go down his spine. The room was dismal, and it reminded Harry of a room he had sometimes seen in his nightmares, although

he had no idea how he had managed to dream about a room he had never seen before. He was pulled out of his memories by Justin telling him to sit down.

In the classroom, the desks were arranged to seat three people and Harry sat down on Justin's left side. The seat next to Harry was taken by a girl he knew was called Susan. He was unable to remember her last name, but when she had smiled at Harry and asked if she could sit by him, Harry had nodded eagerly, glad that she was not just sitting by him because it was the last open chair.

Harry had no chance to learn Susan's last name as Severus Snape, the Potions Master, swept into the room, his eyes immediately falling upon Harry, but they continued past him to sweep the entire room. He then gave them the usual speech he always gave to the first years before taking the register. As he reached Harry, he put down his quill. "Mr. Potter, our new celebrity."

Harry had the sinking feeling that the Professor did not like him. "Yes, Sir?"

"You will address me as Professor Snape," Severus snarled at the boy. "Name for me, Potter, one potion you could make if you used aloe juice and witch hazel."

Harry struggled to remember what he had read when he had glanced through his Potions textbook in his cupboard under the stairs after everyone had gone to bed. "Um, um, Soothing Balm, Professor Snape."

Severus hid his annoyance that Harry was right, and so he asked a question that he knew that Harry would have no chance of answering. "What is the stabilizing ingredient in Polyjuice Potion, Potter?"

Harry had never even heard of Polyjuice Potion, let alone knew what was in it. "I don't know, Professor Snape."

"Not as clever as you'd like to think you are, eh, Potter?" Snape smiled viciously. He then turned and touched the blackboard with his wand and writing appeared. "You've got one hour to make the potion on the board. And you'll be working alone. When it is complete, place it in the vial provided and bring it up to the front."

His tongue between his teeth as he concentrated, Harry completed it in thirty minutes and took it up to the front. "I've finished, Professor Snape."

Severus looked dubiously at Harry's potion, dipping a piece of litmus into it. He was more than a little frustrated when the litmus paper indicated that it was the right pH level, and after a second test, using a toothpick to determine the viscosity of the potion, the right consistency. "Adequate. Get back to your desk."

Harry had the suspicion that Severus was not going to make his life easy, and he returned to his seat and started reading his Potions textbook in the hope that Severus would not quiz him again.

At the end of the lesson, Severus assigned the class homework before letting them go. On leaving the classroom, Susan tagged alongside Harry and Justin. "I'm Susan Bones."

Harry held out his hand. "I'm Harry Potter, and this is Justin Finch-Fletchley."

After shaking hands with both boys, Susan went on to discuss Snape in a hushed voice. "Professor Snape really doesn't seem to like you. My aunt warned me about him."

Harry was interested in Susan's aunt. "Has she had him as a teacher?"

Susan shook her head. "She taught DADA here for a year just after Headmaster Dumbledore employed Professor Snape. She said he favors Slytherin."

Justin joined in the conversation as well. "So why did your aunt leave?"

"She was offered a position at BritAD." Susan used the common abbreviation all Aurors used.

Justin frowned. "What's BritAD?"

"It's British Auror Division." Susan gave the full title. "They police the wizarding world. Aunt Amy is head of it now. She did worry about

taking the job though, as I live with her and she was concerned about my being left alone if there was ever an emergency. But things worked out okay with my childhood babysitter, Aunt Andy, allowing me to have an emergency portkey to her house."

"What's a portkey?" Harry asked.

"A magical way of travelling," Susan explained. "It's much cleaner than flooing, and much faster than the Knight Bus." She then asked about Harry, obviously aware that his parents were long dead. "What about you? Who do you live with?"

Harry grimaced. "I live with my aunt and uncle."

"Are they magical?" Susan asked as they sat down at Hufflepuff table.

Harry shook his head as he placed a large pork chop onto his plate. "They're Muggles, and they don't really like magic very much."

"My grandparents on my Mum's side were Muggles." Susan's face fell slightly. "You-Know-Who killed them at the same time he killed Mum and Dad."

Harry identified with the young girl's situation. "I'm sorry."

"It's the same for you," Susan correctly pointed out. "But Aunt Amy is really nice, even if she is a bit strict."

"My relatives are very strict." Harry could not say that they were nice.

"So is my father," Justin revealed. "I have to watch what I say and do in front of him. But Mum is very relaxed."

"What do your parents do?" Susan asked, aware that Justin was a Muggleborn.

"Father owns his own investment company." A company that Justin was expected to return to the Muggle world to take over when he was old enough. "But Mum doesn't work."

Susan then asked about Harry's relatives. "What do your relatives do?"

"Uncle Vernon works for a drills factory and Aunt Petunia stays at home." Harry had often wished his Aunt had worked as well.

Neither Justin nor Susan thought Vernon's job sounded very thrilling, and the subject was duly changed as the trio continued to load up their plates with food.

Harry had no idea that while he and his friends had been discussing their families, Albus Dumbledore had left the school to go visit Harry's relatives.

Privet Drive

Petunia opened up her front door to find the Headmaster standing there. "What do you want?"

"To talk about your treatment of Harry." Albus had raised his voice, aware that this woman would find it uncomfortable. He had also deliberately put on his brightest robes; bright orange ones with massive red and yellow stars that fizzed loudly in and out of existence.

"We can talk in the hallway." Petunia ground her teeth as she let the Headmaster in. "You wanted to talk about the brat?"

Albus was not bothered where the talk took place, and stepping into the hallway, he immediately expressed his dismay at Petunia's treatment of Harry. "Petunia, you should be ashamed of yourself. Harry told me what you had done to him after I left."

"The little brat deserved it." Petunia refused to feel embarrassed or remorseful. "He was derelict in carrying out his chores."

"I'd disagree. No child should have to do the things you made Harry do." Albus tried guilt to make Petunia see reason. "How would you feel if this situation had been reversed, and it was your son who was an orphan living with your sister? Do you imagine that Lily would have treated Dudley in the same way you've treated Harry?"

"She would never have gotten the chance," Petunia responded smartly. "If anything was to happen to either myself or to Vernon, Dudley would go and live with his Aunt Marge. I would never have

relied on my freaky sister, and I'm quite sure she would never have chosen me to take care of her brat."

Petunia was right, and Lily had stipulated other guardians. Unfortunately when Voldemort had killed the Potters, neither guardian had been available to take care of Harry, and Albus would have worked to revoke their guardianship at the time, even if they had been free to take him. "Why do you hate Harry so much? It isn't his fault that you and Lily didn't get along."

"He's a burden I didn't ask for." Petunia folded her arms, wanting this offensive looking man out of her home. "Is that all you came to say?"

Albus tried to look for the good in everyone but he could not help but place this woman on the same level as Voldemort for having little or no kindness in her. "No, it isn't. I'm going to be removing Harry from your custodianship."

Petunia's face reflected her joy before she thought about something that was important to her: money. "What about the allowance I receive for him?"

"As you know, Harry has to spend at least two weeks in your care every year for the blood magic to be effective. He will therefore still have to return here at the start of the summer holidays for two weeks." Albus had explained to Petunia why Harry needed to live with her in the letter he had left with Harry when he had first placed him on the doorstep of Petunia's home. "And you will be compensated fairly for his time here."

Aware that the generous income she received for Harry's care was going to be drastically reduced, Petunia bargained with Albus. "If he wants to come back, then I expect the full stipend, regardless of how short a stay he makes."

Albus was reluctant to pay this money-grabbing woman anything but Harry's safety had to come first, and the blood magic would be useless if he tried to force Petunia to take Harry in. "I will arrange for you to receive half of his previous allowance but there will be provisos. If you say no, then I'll take my chances with Harry's care." Albus was bluffing but he did not want to pay money that belonged

to Harry to this woman for her sloppy and ill-mannered care of the boy.

"Name the provisos." Petunia would still be receiving a hefty monthly allowance even with half of the payment taken away, and she was not about to give up so much money for the sake of a few provisos.

Albus swiftly set out what he was looking for. "Harry will eat meals with you and your family; you won't use him as a slave; he will have a proper room and bed; and most importantly, you will not ever punish him again."

"Fine!" Petunia snapped. "But he will do his share of chores, and if he misbehaves, he will be punished. I won't have him running roughshod without any way of curtailing him."

"I agree that everyone needs discipline but there must be limits." Albus waved his wand, and said a few words. "The spell I have just cast will ensure that all those in this household don't overstep those limits. If you ever beat Harry again, then the same pain you inflict upon him will be visited tenfold upon your own son."

Petunia did not like Albus' threat one bit. "You can't do that."

"How do you intend to stop me?" Albus asked in a calm voice.

Petunia changed the subject, knowing that she could do nothing against Albus, nor was she willing to refuse to take Harry in, the money driving her to say yes. "I'm not picking the boy up, nor will I chauffeur him around. You will arrange for his transportation here. And nothing freaky."

Albus knew that this woman would never accept magic, and he assured her that Harry's transportation would not fall under 'freaky'. "Harry's new guardian will ensure Harry's safe arrival and departure by a Muggle method."

Petunia terminated their conversation. "If that's everything then, I'd like you to get out of my house."

"Don't forget my warning." Albus opened the front door and walked out, leaving it for Petunia to close it behind him. He smiled to himself as thought about the spell he had just cast. Contrary to what he had

told Petunia, Dudley would receive punishment if she or Vernon hurt Harry, but it would be no worse than the pain inflicted upon Harry. However, the pain Vernon and Petunia would receive would be the tenfold that Dumbledore had warned her about. Popping a sherbet lemon into his mouth, Dumbledore reached the edge of the wards, checked around him, and vanished.

Hogwarts

Saturday rolled around, and Harry was delighted to receive two letters: one from Hagrid asking him to tea that afternoon, and the other from Albus Dumbledore asking him to join him in his office at the same time.

Because he had to see the Headmaster, Harry quickly penned an apologetic note to Hagrid, and excusing himself from studying with Justin and Susan, he headed for the owlery. Hedwig immediately flew down as soon as she saw Harry, her tone scolding as she nibbled gently at his ear. Harry brushed a finger over Hedwig's chest. "I'm sorry I haven't been to see you but lessons seem to take up all of my time, Hedwig. I'd let you live in the dormitory but you wouldn't be happy."

Hedwig loved the openness of the owlery as she could leave and fly around whenever she chose to. Settling down, she waited for Harry's instructions. Harry affixed the letter to Hagrid that he had written to Hedwig. "Please take this to Hagrid for me."

Hedwig was a little disappointed that she would not be travelling further that day, but she nevertheless took to the wing and disappeared out of one of the glassless windows as her master turned to leave the room.

It was several hours later when Harry realized that he had no idea where the Headmaster's office was, and he had to approach Marjorie Banks, the seventh year prefect and sister of the boy who had spoken to Harry at breakfast at the start of the week. "Marjorie?"

"Yes?" Marjorie looked up from the paper she was working on.

"I have to see the Headmaster this afternoon but I don't know where his office is." Harry shifted nervously from one foot to the other.

Marjorie noted the movement. "You're not in trouble already, are you?"

Harry did not think he was. "No, Marjorie."

"It's on the second floor, and it's guarded by a gargoyle." Marjorie fixed Harry with a stern stare. "I really do hope you aren't in trouble because it's tough enough for Hufflepuff without our own bringing us down."

"I'm not in trouble." Harry hoped he wasn't lying. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Marjorie returned her attention to her work as Harry left.

Harry was met at the bottom of the staircase to the Headmaster's office by his Transfiguration teacher, Professor McGonagall. "Good afternoon, Professor."

Minerva could see that Harry was nervous. "Good afternoon, Mr. Potter. Let's go up, shall we?"

Harry was now afraid that, contrary to what he had told Marjorie, he was in trouble. His face was obviously reflecting his fears because as soon as Harry entered the office, the Headmaster got to his feet and allayed Harry's concerns with a welcoming smile. "Hello, my boy, come in, come in."

Harry was then steered through a doorway at the back of Albus' office and up a corridor before entering a side room, which he discovered was a sitting room. A cheery fire blazed in the green tiled hearth, and four big cream colored chairs flanked it. On a cherry table to the left of the fireplace, a large spread of food, which included Harry's favorite sandwiches, corned beef, was piled up. Harry was maneuvered into a chair, and he waited to hear what Albus had to say.

Albus sat down closest to the fireplace, Minerva sitting opposite him. "Harry, my boy, before I tell you why you're here, I first of all want to apologize."

Of all the things that Harry had expected Albus to say, it had not been that. "What for, Sir?"

"Professor McGonagall warned me about leaving you with your relatives, but in fear for your safety I chose to ignore her warning." Albus did not look at Minerva as he spoke, keeping his gaze firmly fixed on Harry's face. "I believed that your aunt would overlook her dislike of magic because you were a baby. I was wrong."

Harry bit his lip as Albus continued. "I went to see your aunt after learning of her treatment of you." On seeing Harry's frightened look, he hurried to tell Harry about what had happened. "We have agreed that you will only return there for two weeks at the start of the summer term. While there, you will receive three meals a day, sleep in a proper bed, and only carry out chores fitting for someone of your age. If your aunt does not adhere to these terms then you are to tell me."

Harry's mouth fell open. "But..."

He did not get any further as Albus continued. "Let me finish, Harry. Now because you won't be spending all summer with your aunt, with your permission, I would like to arrange for a change of guardian for you."

Harry was completely stunned by the news, but he quickly rallied to enquire as to the identity of his new guardian. "Who, Sir?"

"Me." Minerva joined in the conversation. "I wanted to take you in as a baby, but Albus felt that your safety was the utmost priority, and he refused my request. However, as I believe your aunt is almost as much as a danger to you as those who would harm you, he's finally agreed to let me take over your care." Her face softened. "If you want me to."

Harry had been a little nervous around the stern but fair professor but seeing her features form a gentle smile, he suddenly realized that she was not as frightening as she had first seemed. "You really want to look after me?"

Minerva got up and took Harry's hand in her own. "I do, Harry."

Harry did not really know how to respond. "Um, thank you, Professor."

Minerva smiled. "When we are in private you can call me Aunt Minerva."

Harry was more than pleased by his new arrangements but he did have some questions. "Can I tell anyone else that you're going to be looking after me?"

Albus and Minerva shared a quick glance, before Albus answered. "I think it best you keep this to yourself for the moment. I don't want rumors of favoritism marring your time at school, and if it appears that Minerva has taken over your guardianship, this could happen."

"Okay." Harry understood Albus' stance. "So do I have to do anything?"

"Not a thing." Albus got to his feet. "I'm going to leave you and Minerva alone to talk together."

"I don't mind if you stay, Sir," Harry blurted out, still a little nervous around his new guardian.

"Then stay, Albus," Minerva instructed, recognizing that Harry had latched onto the elderly gentleman. "We can all have some tea together."

"Well, the house-elves did supply chocolate cake, so I think I'll do that." Albus beamed at Harry and sat back down.

As they ate the delicious food, the three began to talk about Harry's future, what he could expect from Minerva, and what she expected from him.

When quizzed by Marjorie later that evening, Harry simply told her that the Headmaster had wanted to discuss Harry's home arrangements, and the girl had gone off satisfied that Hufflepuff would not be penalized for something Harry might have done.

And now that he had something to look forward to and someone he could trust and turn to, Harry became a little more confident, and he quickly settled into his new life at Hogwarts. Professor Snape no longer frightened him quite so much, as he knew that Minerva would have his back. And it was obvious that Snape knew about the new arrangement as he all but ignored Harry.

So although the stumbling block of Snape was out of the way, Harry was now faced with another one, flying lessons. He had no idea what to do, and he imagined that he would be awful at flying. Dreading it, the lesson came around far too quickly for Harry, and before he knew where the time had gone, he found himself standing outside, listening to his teacher, a hawk-faced woman called Madam Hooch, lecturing on the correct etiquette when it came to flying.

Keeping half an ear on what his teacher was saying, Harry looked dubiously at the broom that was lying at his feet, and he whispered to Justin. "Malfoy and Weasley have obviously flown before, and I'm going to look really stupid when I fall off."

"So am I," Justin whispered back. "I don't even like heights."

Susan, who was close enough to hear what was being said, grinned at her friends. "Don't worry. Most of the kids here have never flown in spite of what Malfoy and Weasley are saying."

Both Draco and Ron had been boasting about their flying prowess to anyone that would listen.

Feeling his teacher's beady eyes on him, Harry turned his attention back to what she was saying, hiding his snigger when she corrected Draco's grip. And Harry was duly rewarded for his concentration when, after yelling 'up' in a forceful voice, the broom flew straight into his hand.

Justin copied Harry's tone, and he too was compensated in a similar fashion. Susan was having a little less luck with her broom until Justin got her to slow down and try again.

One of the Gryffindors, Neville Longbottom, was also not having much luck, and, as he mounted his broom, it lifted up, carrying him up off the ground before bucking him off, a small globe falling from his pocket onto the ground a few feet away from where Neville had made a clumsy and heavy crash landing. Hooch had to take Neville off to the hospital wing when it became apparent that Neville had broken his arm, but not before issuing a warning to the remaining students about keeping their feet on the ground.

The teacher gone, Draco, who had spotted the globe, picked it up. "Longbottom is a butterfingers as well as forgetful." The globe was actually a remembrall, an item that helped you remember if you had forgotten something, and Neville had received it from his grandmother a few days earlier. Draco had tried to take it then but he had been thwarted by Professor Flitwick. Now there was no teacher to stop him, and he threw the little ball into the air and caught it again, smirking.

Ron stepped up to Draco. "Give it back, Malfoy."

Draco climbed onto his broom. "Come and get it, Weasley."

Ron was about to climb onto his own broom when a bushy-haired girl Harry remembered was called Hermione, hissed at Ron. "You'll get into trouble."

"I don't care." Ron mounted his broom and rose precariously into the air.

Susan whispered quietly to Harry. "See, I told you that he was just boasting."

Harry smiled as the very unsteady Ron rose up to face Draco. He did note, however, that in contrast to Ron, Draco seemed extremely comfortable on his own broom, giving Draco's previous boasting some foundation. "Weasley really is going to get into trouble. He's barely staying upright."

"Summon the remembrall," Susan suggested.

Harry looked at her as if she had gone mad. "I don't know how."

"The incantation is 'accio', and then the item," Susan informed him, having seen her aunt do it on countless occasions. "I've tried it before but I can't do it."

"What makes you think I can?" Harry kept half an eye on the discourse that was still going on.

"You're the Boy Who Lived," Susan reminded him quite unnecessarily. "If you can beat You-Know-Who, you can summon something."

"I didn't beat him. I just got lucky," Harry whispered back. "And I'm going to look silly when I fail at casting the spell."

"And Weasley is going to fall if you don't." Justin could see the broom that Ron was on was not co-operating, and the boy was barely holding his seat as Draco flew higher and higher.

Not once questioning why this was his responsibility, Harry withdrew his wand and aimed it at Draco. "Accio Remembrall." As he incanted the spell, Harry noticed quite a few of the students watching him, and he waited for them to start laughing when he failed. Therefore no-one was more surprised than Harry when the little globe shot out of Draco's hand and flew through the air into Harry's own hand.

Ron gave Harry a surprised look but he was relieved to be able to save face, and he flew back down to the ground towards Harry.

Draco scowled at Harry as he also flew over to him. "How did you do that?"

"I pointed my wand at the remembrall and summoned it, Malfoy." Harry's tone was totally sarcastic, hiding the fact that he had been reluctant to try.

Draco touched down and faced off against Harry. "You had no right to interfere, Potter."

"And you had no right to refuse to hand over the remembrall, but you still did it," Harry retorted as Draco turned red.

Harry turned on his back on Draco and passed the remembrall over to Ron, who by now was standing next to him. "Give this to your friend and tell him to take more care of it next time."

"I could have gotten it." Despite his gratefulness that he had been allowed to save face, Ron still felt as though he had something to prove to Harry.

Harry could see Hooch returning in the distance. "I know that but the teacher was coming back."

Ron glanced around. "Oh. Thanks then."

"You're welcome." Harry swung back round, only for Draco to hiss at him.

"I'm going to get you for that, Potter."

"Just leave him alone," Susan snapped.

"Need a girl to fight your battles for you, Potter?" Draco snorted before he walked back over to where his sidekicks were.

Susan turned apologetically to Harry. "I'm sorry. I think I made it worse."

"It's okay," Harry assured her. "No-one's ever stuck up for me before. It was nice."

The two shared a smile, and then, like everyone else, turned their attention back to the teacher.

As the flying lesson ended, and the students returned to the school, Draco and most of the first year Slytherins cornered Harry, Justin, and Susan just inside of the entrance to the school. "You shouldn't have interfered, Potter."

"That was not your remembrall to take." Harry was quaking but stood his ground.

"You made me look stupid," Draco snapped, his face reddening with anger as he recalled how the Gryffindors had laughed at him.

"I thought those in Slytherin were supposed to be a little more restrained than the other houses, something you weren't." Harry used Draco's own words from his talk on the Hogwarts Express to get back at the boy. "If it had been me I would have waited to find a far better use for the remembrall." Harry hinted that he would have used it for blackmail, when in reality he would have simply given it straight back.

"You're not a Slytherin, so I don't care about what you would have done." Draco's voice was strained, embarrassed at being shown up in front of his fellow housemates yet again. "The Hat was right when it made you a useless Hufflepuff."

"I'm glad it did, Malfoy, because I'd be embarrassed to be in Slytherin with someone like you." Harry could hear the shocked gasps echoing around the entrance. He wondered himself how he was managing to stand up against Malfoy, when really all he wanted to do was run and hide and not stir up the confrontation.

"How dare you?" Draco's face grew even redder. "You have no right to talk to me like that."

"What are you going to do about it, Malfoy?" A voice came out of the shadows, and everyone turned to find George Weasley from Gryffindor standing there. "Whine about it like a little baby?"

Draco scowled at the third year. "No. I'm going to challenge Potter to a wizards' duel."

Harry's eyes widened as George continued to goad Malfoy, his voice mocking. "Are you going to fight to the death, Malfoy?"

Draco knew he had no chance of killing anyone but he brazened it out anyway. "Of course, Weasley, unless Potter's too scared."

Not really wanting to have anything to do with a wizards' duel, Harry gulped when George again answered for him. "He's not. I'm going to be his second. Name your own."

"Zabini." Draco saw his friend give a very unpleasant smile intended for Harry. "And when I win, for insulting me, Potter will make a public apology to me on his hands and knees in the Great Hall."

Once he realized that Draco's comment meant that the duel was unlikely going to end in his death, Harry finally came out of his nervous silence, and he again found the courage that he had displayed before George had interrupted his and Draco's discourse. "I thought we were fighting to the death, Malfoy, but I agree to your terms."

As Harry finished speaking, George stepped in yet again. "And when Harry wins, Malfoy, you will allow me to change your hair to Gryffindor red, and it will remain that way for one week." In the short time that he had been at Hogwarts, everyone, including Harry, had heard Draco boasting about his beloved locks.

Draco was not enamored of George's proviso since his hair was his pride and joy. But unwilling to lose face in front of the assembled group, which had by now grown much bigger, he ignored George, and held out his hand to Harry. "Accepted."

Harry shook Draco's hand, and George put in his final word. "Let us know the details."

As George and everyone else walked off, Harry remained where he was, muttering under his breath to himself. "So much for fading into the background!"

Next Chapter: Harry and George discover something frightening lurking in the school. Harry receives a letter.

Note: Again, more removals, insertions, and a few grammatical changes. Also a change has been made to Susan's former babysitter. Next chapter should be back up on Tuesday.

Chapter 6: The Three Headed Dog

Now, almost a week later, Harry found himself getting dressed to meet Draco at midnight in the Trophy Room. He was also supposed to meet George at the same place.

Justin pleaded with his friend as Harry pulled on his trainers. "Harry, you don't have to do this. Malfoy's an idiot."

"He has to." Ernie, who had also been watching Harry get ready to leave, called out. "Everyone will call him a coward if he doesn't go. And it's the worst form of insult if you renege on a wizards' duel."

Harry had been half-leaning towards Justin's suggestion of just not going, or of telling a teacher but now, with Ernie's comments ringing in his ears, he knew that he could not shy away from what lay ahead. "I have to do this. I'll hopefully be back later."

As soon as he opened the door to step out of the entrance from Hufflepuff, Harry found George waiting for him, partially hidden by a suit of armor. "How did you know where I'd come out?"

"Because I obviously know where the entrance Hufflepuff is." George did not, however, reveal how he knew that. "Come on. I know a shortcut to the Trophy Room." Draco had specified the Trophy Room and the time of the duel, as he had been the one to issue the challenge.

As Harry walked alongside George, he questioned George's motives in offering to be his second, not quite as convinced as Justin and Susan that George had wanted to get at Draco. "Why did you offer to be my second? You barely know me."

"I know that but I hate people like Malfoy, and this is the perfect chance to see him brought down a peg or two." George gave his reason for offering, proving both Justin and Susan correct. "And don't worry, it has nothing to do with your being the Boy Who Lived." George suspected, quite correctly, that Harry did not like the fame that went along with his title.

"I'm glad about that," Harry remarked, before falling silent as they reached the Trophy Room.

After ten minutes, Harry checked the time. "I'd have thought that Malfoy would have been here by now."

George stepped outside of the room, and he glanced up and down the corridor. "I can't see anyone. I think he's reneged."

Harry was rather glad that Draco did not appear to be coming as he had no idea how to fight a duel. "Why do you think he isn't here?" The question went unanswered as a mewling sound drew the attention of the two boys, and Harry gulped as he looked down. "That's Mrs. Norris, Filch's cat."

"So the little bastard not only didn't turn up but I bet he also informed Filch someone would be here." George's mouth tightened. "We should leave before we're discovered."

The two boys hurried away, only to realize that Filch was blocking their way, his slimy voice reaching them as he talked to his cat, which had somehow managed to get ahead of George and Harry. Harry debated what to do, and he decided that he wanted to try and re-establish his initial desire to fade into the background, something that would not happen if Filch caught him. "Let's go this way."

The two boys fled up a set of stairs and along a corridor, neither of them really paying any attention to where they were going. As they reached a dead-end, marked by a locked large wooden door, George swore when he heard Filch closing in on their position. Having little choice, George unlocked the door barring their way to safety, and he dragged Harry inside of the room.

Harry, who had closed his eyes in relief, leant against the door. "I thought we were done for." He then opened his eyes to observe the biggest dog he had ever seen. But what frightened him most was not how big it was, but that it had three heads.

And he was not alone with his fear. George was a brave boy but the sight of what stood in front of him scared even him. "Harry, this must be the third floor..." George's voice trailed off, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Harry barely registered George's comment that they might be on the banned third floor, which at the start of term the Headmaster had warned the entire school about not entering. He was too afraid to

think about anything except for the large animal in front of him. Fear overwhelming him, Harry closed his eyes again, nervously started singing, and cowered down.

Standing over Harry, George was shocked when the dog also closed its eyes and then began to sway in time with Harry's warbling tune, before it lay down and began snoring. "Harry!"

At George's anxious whisper, Harry opened his eyes to spot what George had witnessed. He stopped singing in surprise and almost immediately the dog started to rouse. George frantically made a demand. "Keep singing! Keep singing!"

Harry did as he was told as George opened the door, grabbed Harry's arm and hustled him out of the room. Only after the door had closed and George had called out a locking spell, did Harry stop singing, but he once again closed his eyes, this time it was in relief though. When he reopened them, it was to find George staring at him as if he had turned into an alien. "What?"

George's voice sounded a little squeaky and tremulous to both himself and Harry. "How did you know how to do that?"

"I didn't." Harry's voice was also shaking, still scared from their encounter. "I freeze up when I get afraid, and I don't know why but singing makes me feel as though I'm safe."

"Normally, I'd say that wouldn't work," George remarked wryly. "But thank goodness it did this time." He then glanced around, searching for the caretaker. "I think Filch has gone. You should return to Hufflepuff."

"What about Malfoy?" Harry remembered what Ernie had said to him before he had left the dormitory. "He chickened out."

George smiled grimly. "I know that, and so I'll be dealing with Malfoy. After what we went through tonight, I think he deserves slightly more than red hair."

"What are you going to do to him?" Harry asked as the two boys walked back up the corridor.

George's grim smile widened. "You'll see."

The next morning Harry recounted his adventure with George to his friends, who had both tried guessing why there would be a three headed dog in the school, but neither of them could come up with a good reason. And like Harry, they too could not wait to see what George had planned, and all three of them were a little disappointed when, after two days, nothing had happened. Harry's disappointment, however, was curtailed by a letter, which a small chocolate colored owl came flying in with. Harry knew the only person likely to be writing to him would be Luna, and his face lit up that his friend had responded to his own missive. After passing the owl a slightly fluffy owl treat from his pocket, Harry took the letter from its leg and opened it, eager to see what his friend had to say.

'Dear Harry

Thanks for your letter. Hedwig delivered it to me, and she's resting up before she returns, so I sent Galaxy with my letter. I'm touring Scandinavia with Daddy looking for Snorkacks and Grismacks.'

Harry broke off from his reading. "Susan, what are Snorkacks and Grismacks?"

Susan looked at Harry as if he had gone mad. "Never heard of them. Why?"

"Luna said she was looking for them," Harry explained.

"Luna Lovegood?" Susan queried Harry's use of Luna's name.

"Yeah." Harry could tell that something was up from Susan's tone. "I met her in Diagon Alley and she asked if she could write to me. Is something wrong with that?"

"No, of course not," Susan hurriedly assured Harry. "It's just that the Lovegood family is considered a little..." Susan searched for the right word, "...um, odd."

Justin, who knew that Harry was corresponding with the young blonde girl, butted in. "Do they turn into vampires or something?" Justin had become fixated with vampires ever since he had learnt that they existed in the wizarding world.

Susan smiled at Justin's assumption. "No but Luna's Dad is well-known for a paper he prints called 'The Quibbler'. It's a little peculiar and has weird stories in it."

"Like what?" Harry asked, his letter put aside as he quizzed Susan.

"Well, there was a story in the Daily Prophet just before we started school about how someone had broken into Gringotts but that nothing had been stolen." Susan knew that the two boys would not have seen the story. "But Luna's dad printed a story on the same day saying that it was Leprechauns who broke in to steal magic honey."

Harry was not sure what to make of the story the elder Lovegood had printed. "Do Leprechauns exist?"

"Yes, but there's no such thing as magic honey, and if there was, it wouldn't be locked in Gringotts," Susan remarked in a sage voice. "And it's not just Luna's dad. Luna's mum was always considered a bit strange as well. She used to write a column in the Quibbler about true love. She claimed that if two people were meant for each other, she could tell straightaway."

"Do you think she could?" Justin asked, as like Harry, he had no idea of what was true in the wizarding world and what was not.

"Maybe." Susan had not immediately dismissed the story as hokum like some. "There are seers who can tell the future, so Luna's mum may have been able to tell if a couple was meant for each other. But Aunt Amy said that her claim may have been because of the potions she sold. They weren't illegal, but Lavinia Lovegood did quite well selling these potions, which she claimed could do the same as she could and tell if someone was a person's true love."

Harry brought up what Luna had told him. "Luna told me her mum died when she was making a potion."

Susan confirmed that what Luna had told Harry was true. "She did. Aunt Amy said that a new potion she was making went wrong. Poor Luna was actually there. Aunt Amy said it was awful." Knowing the Lovegoods fairly well, Amelia Bones had been one of the Aurors who had attended the scene of the accident.

His overactive imagination filling the scene in for him, Harry decided he needed to be alone, and he therefore folded up his letter and picked up his rucksack. "I'm going to the library. I'll see you both later."

Susan felt a little guilty that she had driven Harry away but Justin reassured her that Harry still hadn't finished his Charms homework.

Once inside the library, Harry delved into his rucksack and pulled out the letter, which he began to read again.

'...Snorkacks and Grismacks. We haven't found any yet but Daddy said that they can become invisible if they're scared.

How is Hufflepuff? I want to be in the same house as you but Mummy always said that I'd be in Ravenclaw, and she was never wrong. She did tell me that I would marry someone from Hufflepuff though, and..."

Harry broke off from reading the letter again, and he shoved it back in his rucksack. In his mind's eye he could see the blonde girl in a wedding gown chasing him up the aisle telling him he had to marry her because her mum said so. Harry suddenly shook himself. "I've been listening to Susan too much." But unnerved, he did not take the letter back out of his rucksack. Instead, he decided to try again with his Charms homework.

He was about to take it out of his rucksack when he spotted Draco and his goons coming his way. Hoping that they might ignore him if they thought he was busy, Harry picked up a book, which he had pulled from his rucksack as he had searched for the letter. Sadly his ploy failed. Draco still came up to the table Harry was seated at, and Harry scowled at him. "Malfoy, what do you want?"

Draco glanced at the name of the book that Harry had in front of him. "The Nicomachean Ethics, Book 2. Trying to look clever, Potter?"

"At least I understand it." Harry tapped his fingers on the book cover as he closed it, not wanting Draco to see inside of it. "Tell me what you think of it. I could only get a copy in English and not the original, and personally I find it loses something in translation."

"Whatever, Potter. I've got better things to do than to discuss a stupid book." Draco had no idea what the book was about, and nodding to Crabbe and Goyle to follow, he walked off.

Harry dropped his head, struggling to hide his giggles. Once they were under control, he looked up to find that Hermione Granger of Gryffindor was watching him. "Do you want something?"

"Do you really understand the book?" Hermione sidled over to the desk.

Harry looked around to make sure that Draco really had gone, and then he grinned, before pulling off the jacket of the book to reveal a copy of 'The Magician's Nephew' underneath it. "Not at all, so I junked it after trying to read the first few pages. I didn't want to damage this book so I used the cover of the Ethics book to protect it."

"So what about what you said to Malfoy?" Hermione's curiosity was now more than piqued.

Harry grinned again. "I heard someone talking about the books in the bookstore in Diagon Alley, and so I decided to buy one of them to see what they meant. Have you read any of them?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, but unlike Malfoy I think I know what they're about." At Harry's challenging look, she summed it up. "The books were written by a Greek philosopher named Aristotle, who was a wizard. And he used the books to set out his opinion about human beings and their morals." Hermione's description was basically right but the books went far deeper than that.

Harry was surprised that Hermione had any idea at all of what the books were about. "You're really clever."

"My parents have always talked to me as an equal," Hermione explained, and unbidden she went on further to tell Harry about her parents. "Daddy is a dentist but he also does research into the field of orthodontics, and Mummy is also a dentist who works with him. She also sometimes does translating on the side as she speaks six languages."

"Are they Muggles?" Harry asked with interest.

Hermione shifted uncomfortably, as she was already aware of the prejudices that existed in the school. "Yes, why?"

"I was just asking." Harry did not want Hermione to feel uncomfortable, and he hurriedly told Hermione about his former living conditions, which he now only had to endure for two weeks every year. "I live with my aunt and uncle who are also Muggles, but I don't like them and they don't like me."

Taking into consideration what Harry had just revealed, Hermione decided that Harry had not been trying to be rude, and she therefore returned to the subject of Harry's book. "Were you about to read the Magician's Nephew?"

"Nah. I've read it loads of times already." The C.S. Lewis book had been one of Dudley's old ones that Dudley had never read. It had not flashed or banged, and it did not have an 'on' switch, so Dudley had had no interest in the Chronicles of Narnia. Harry had therefore managed to take all seven books and hide them in his cupboard, giving him something to read in the night. The imaginary world had allowed Harry to escape from the misery of his own existence, and he had often pictured himself as the High King Peter, but he did not believe he could ever be that brave.

"I really liked those books." Hermione, unlike Dudley, had always been interested in reading, and she also had a copy of the Chronicles. "When I was younger, it was nice to pretend that there might be an imaginary world in a wardrobe."

Harry did not mention that he had been hoping for the same, more or less right up until Dumbledore had come to his home and he had told Harry that he had a different world of his own to which he could escape. "I bet you were glad then when you found out you were a witch." As he finished speaking, Harry shoved the book back into his rucksack and pulled out his Charms homework.

"I was." Hermione noticed the textbook Harry had yanked out. "Haven't you done that yet?"

Harry went red at the astounded tone in Hermione's voice. "No. I was about to work on it. I'm having problems with the incantation to

make my pencil twirl, and I've also still got to write a foot on what use a spell like that might be."

"I can't do the writing assignment for you but I will help you with the incantation," Hermione offered, an eager look appearing on her face, "if you want me to."

"Please." Harry pulled out the chair next to him.

Hermione accepted the unspoken invitation and sat down.

Almost an hour later, Justin and Susan entered the library to find Harry folding up a roll of parchment, Hermione at his side. "Hi."

Both children looked up, Harry immediately remembering his manners. "Justin, Susan, this is Hermione. She's been helping me with my incantation for Charms."

Susan had noticed the parchment. "And your assignment?"

Hermione disabused Susan of her notion that she had done Harry's work for him. "I just looked it over for mistakes after Harry had finished but he wrote it himself."

Susan reddened. "Sorry."

"It's okay." Harry responded easily, before hesitantly making a request. "Um, would you two mind if Hermione joins us for study periods in the library?"

Still embarrassed by her accusation, Susan immediately shook her head. "She's welcome to."

Justin knew how tough Hermione was having it, having overheard a conversation between two of the girls in Hermione's year about Hermione being a know-it-all, and he suspected she did not have any friends. He remembered how afraid he had been that he would be in the same position, and so, like Susan, he also agreed to the girl's inclusion. "Anytime."

Hermione smiled a little shakily as she held back tears of relief. She had wanted so desperately to fit in but she had found that she had little in common with Parvati Patil or Lavender Brown, the two girls in

her dormitory. Now she felt as though she had finally found a niche. "Thanks."

And so the trio grew to a quartet that two people were rather jealous of, Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom.

Ron was jealous because he had wanted to be Harry's friend, and even though George was not part of the quartet, he had already befriended Harry and had refused to introduce Ron. Aware of what had happened on the flying pitch with the remembrall, George had told Ron to approach Harry himself, especially given that he had already spoken to Harry, but Ron had balked at the idea.

Neville was also jealous but for entirely different reasons. It seemed to Neville that Harry was really brave and people took notice of him. All of Neville's life had been lived in the background, and he had rarely ever received words of encouragement or praise, and he had always wanted to be like the Boy Who Lived, who he believed to be heroic and someone special. He had been a little disconcerted when Harry had been sorted in Hufflepuff but news of the duel with Draco had gone around the school like wildfire, once again cementing Harry's bravery in Neville's mind, and driving his jealousy even deeper.

Harry, of course, was completely unaware of either boy's thoughts or feelings, and apart from Hermione, his only interest in someone in Gryffindor was in George. He had questioned George nearly every day as to when he would get back at Malfoy but George had told Harry to be patient. It was almost a week after Hermione had joined their group when Harry's patience was finally rewarded.

Harry was eating his breakfast when Malfoy and his cronies walked into the Great Hall. He glanced hopefully at George, his head drooping a little when the boy shook his head. If Harry had continued watching, he would have seen George grin and then begin whispering softly under his breath, his wand out under the table.

All heads in the Great Hall turned, as a large newspaper appeared in midair from out of nowhere and a mouth formed in the center of it. No-one could avoid hearing its announcement, the doors to the Great Hall slamming shut and sealing everyone inside, as the mouth in the newspaper began to scream the same thing over and over

again. "Draco Malfoy reneges on duel! Draco Malfoy reneges on duel! Draco Malfoy reneges on duel!"

Albus aimed his wand at the newspaper. "Finite Incantatum."

The newspaper ignored him and continued on until it had said the phrase thirty times. Then it fell silent before opening its mouth for one final comment. But it did not repeat its earlier phrase, as a new one came out of the mouth, just as the doors to the Great Hall opened again. "Tricesimus Puniceus Aurum Coma Draco Malfoy."

Gryffindor, and a lot of the other children, burst out laughing as Draco's hair turned the Gryffindor house colors of red and gold. Draco shot out of his seat as he caught sight of his reflection in the silverware on the table. "Potter, you did this."

Albus and the entire school's attention turned to Harry, who like the other children, was still laughing. "Did you do this, Mr. Potter?"

Pomona immediately defended her student, as Harry stopped laughing. "This is far beyond Mr. Potter's capabilities, even given who he is, Headmaster."

Albus had to agree but since it appeared that the problem stemmed from both Harry and Draco, he made a demand. "Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Potter, you will both come with me."

A short time later, Harry found himself standing in front of the Headmaster's desk, Fawkes staring intently at him. Draco was scowling at both him and the phoenix.

Albus sat down. "Did you two set up a duel that Mr. Malfoy appears to have reneged on?"

"Yes, Sir," Harry answered immediately, not about to lie to the Headmaster. "But I don't know whether Malfoy turned up in the end or not, as Mr. Filch surprised me and so I ran." Harry was not going to give George up.

"Mr. Malfoy, who else knew about this about duel?" Dumbledore had not sensed any duplicity from Harry, and as Pomona had stated, Harry was far from skilled enough to carry out magic that even he had not been able to stop; although he had to be honest with himself,

he had not really tried that hard, Draco Malfoy far from being one of Dumbledore's favorite students.

"Most of Slytherin House, Sir." Draco had been boasting about how he was going to best Harry Potter, and he was sure that the Headmaster already knew this. Instead, he had changed his mind about going when Blaise had suggested he get Harry into trouble instead. Draco was now angry with himself that he had listened to Blaise, but like Harry with George, he too was going to keep quiet about Blaise's involvement.

"Then I think we know where to lay the blame for your new colors." Albus decided that someone in Draco's house had made the decision to quash Draco's boasting. He had no idea that George Weasley was actually responsible, and he would never have suspected him as the magic in the Great Hall had been far beyond a third year's capability. Albus therefore did not once entertain the thought that George had made use of his one of older brothers' talents. "What were the terms of the duel, Mr. Potter?"

Harry told him about what Draco had wanted and what had been requested in return. "I expected Malfoy to come crowing the morning afterwards because I had had to hide but he didn't. So I just thought that the whole thing had been forgotten about."

"Mr. Malfoy, in light of what you and Mr. Potter have just told me, I can only assume that it is one of your housemates who arranged this morning's display, hence the fact that the spell will only last three days and not the seven days Mr. Potter had stipulated." Albus did not like the idea of the children dueling but he also did not like the concept of reneging, and he therefore decided to teach Draco a lesson. "Both of you will be serving detention tonight with Professor Flitwick for arranging the duel."

Draco put a hand to his head. "What about my hair, Sir?"

"It will stay that way until the spell wears off. I doubt I could remove it," Albus lied, and he hid a smile at the boy's horrified look of dismay. "Perhaps you should ask someone in your house to do so. Now off you both go."

Conscious he was going to get nowhere with the Headmaster nor anyone in his house, when he and Harry reached the bottom of the stairs, Draco turned on Harry. "I know you somehow did this."

Harry grinned, feeling comfortable in baiting Draco. "But I'm only a useless first year Hufflepuff, Malfoy."

"I'll get you back," Malfoy warned, still believing that Harry had done this.

"And I'll be waiting." Harry walked off, whistling, knowing it would annoy Malfoy. He also knew that Malfoy had no way of knowing that his legs were shaking horribly from the encounter with the Headmaster.

In his office, Albus smiled a little sadly, the spell he had put in place when he had first taken up his position, allowing the boys' discussion to reach him. And aware of what Harry was likely going to have to face later in his life, Albus was both relieved and saddened that Harry seemed to be growing a backbone. He had no way of knowing that George Weasley had been the impetus behind Harry's growing confidence, nor did he know that Harry still wanted nothing more than to become part of the background.

Next Chapter: A visit to Hagrid; Hermione develops a crush at Halloween.

Chapter 7: Halloween

October 26th 1991

Hagrid welcomed the four children with a big smile, and he opened wide the door to his hut. "Come in. I was startin' to think that yeh had forgotten me, Harry." Hagrid had invited Harry to see him several times since school had started but each time Harry had had to refuse.

"I've been really busy with schoolwork." Harry was not making an excuse. While all of the teachers did give the children quite a bit of homework to get through, Professor Snape was the worst. He seemed to manage to pile an almost insurmountable amount of homework onto the children, and Harry, Justin, and Susan had been having problems in getting through the assignments, although Harry was developing a remarkable knack of completing his potions both efficiently and perfectly. Just like Harry, Hermione also did well with her potions, but as she had been the only one not to struggle with the written assignments, she had offered to use her spare time to bring the other three up to speed, but it had still meant that the group had had little freedom to take Hagrid up on his offer to see his hut. And so it was only now, with a surprising lull in the constant output, that the children finally found time to visit the large gamekeeper.

Hermione suddenly gave a small scream when a rather large black dog came bounding out of the hut, barking excitedly at her. Hagrid reached out to grab his dog, but he missed and the dog jumped on top of Hermione, knocking her to the ground. "Get off 'er. Stupid dog."

Instead of being savaged, Hermione found herself being licked into submission. Not that that was any pleasanter than the savaging Hermione had expected, as her clothing and face quickly became soaked with dog slobber. "Get it off me."

Hagrid reached down and pulled the boarhound off Hermione. "Sorry 'bout that. Fang is a bit of a softie."

"And he's disgusting. That is just nasty." Susan grimaced at the slobber. She then used one of the few cleaning spells she knew to

clean up Hermione, who, of course, immediately asked Susan to repeat it so that she could learn it as well.

Harry could see that Susan's words had hurt Hagrid, and he hurriedly tried to make up for his friend's rudeness. "He's a nice dog, Hagrid. Have you had him a long time?"

Hagrid's despondent face lit up, his gigantic hand stroking Fang's head. "Since he was a pup."

Susan realized that she had probably offended Hagrid, and she immediately moved to pat Fang as well. "He's seems very friendly."

Hagrid warmed a little towards the red-headed girl as she tickled Fang under his massive head and the dog closed its eyes in joy. "I think he likes yeh." Hagrid then remembered his manners. "Would yeh all like some tea?"

All four children decided to accept, and once inside the hut, they began to look around it with interest. In the corner was a rough table and four chairs, all appearing to be carved out of wood. A fire was burning in the fireplace and over it was hung a massive copper kettle that was starting to steam, Hagrid already having placed it over the heat before the children arrived. There was a massive sofa in the main seating area and a couple of mismatched chairs. There was also another door but the children deduced that, as with the front door, it led outside. The only other major piece of furniture in the hut was Hagrid's huge bed, which was partially hidden behind a curtain.

A few minutes later, Hagrid poured out the tea into a variety of large and mismatched mugs. Harry had to use both hands to drink out of his, hiding a shudder at the overly strong brew. Courtesy of their families' tastes, Susan and Hermione were used to strong tea, and they both drank their beverages without problem. Justin, however, was used to taking his tea with lemon or a splash of milk, and he therefore waited for Hagrid to turn away before he poured most of his tea into a pot that contained a rather bedraggled plant, which looked as though it might benefit from the dark and syrupy offering.

Putting down her mug, Susan found that Fang obviously was not upset by her comments, because he had placed his head on her leg and was now currently drooling over her skirt. Deciding to try and

make up for her initial rudeness, Susan ignored the mess, and she instead stroked Fang's head, making the dog give a happy sigh and drool all the more. "So you like dogs then, Hagrid?"

"Yeah, but I like lots of creatures." Hagrid's face became what could only be described as 'gooey' as he thought about all the creatures he would like to own. "But truth be told, I always wanted a dragon."

Harry's eyebrows shot up into his hairline. "A dragon?"

"Jus' a baby one." Hagrid conveniently decided to forget that dragons did not stay small.

"That's nice." Hermione thought Hagrid was mad. She had already read about dragons, and she had immediately decided that she would steer clear of anything with razor sharp teeth and claws and the ability to breathe fire.

"Hagrid, while we're on the subject of unusual creatures..." Harry kept his voice innocent and light, "...would you like a three headed dog?"

Hagrid, as usual, did not think before responding. "Got one already."

"Is the three headed dog in the school your dog then?" Harry asked pointblank.

"Yeh mean Fluffy?" Hagrid questioned Harry's mention of the dog.

"Fluffy?" Harry's voice grew high pitched. "You call that monster Fluffy?"

"He's a big softie at 'art, jus' like Fang 'ere." Hagrid said the same about the three headed dog as he had about his boarhound. "He's a good boy."

"I'll take your word for it." Harry did not believe Hagrid though.

It was then that it occurred to Hagrid that Harry should not have even known about the dog. "So, 'ow did yeh see Fluffy?"

"Took a wrong turn," Harry answered quite truthfully. "What's he doing in the school?"

Hagrid got to his feet and starting gathering the mugs, his discomfiture at Harry's questioning, patently obvious. "Needed somewhere to stay. Now I'm afraid you'll 'ave to be off now. Things ter do."

The four children found themselves unceremoniously bundled out of Hagrid's hut, and Hermione walked next to Harry as they made their way back to the school. "Well, Fluffy is definitely guarding something, and I think Hagrid knows what it is. He couldn't wait to get rid of us."

"Fluffy was sitting on a trapdoor, so you might be right." Harry had replayed the horror of the dog over and over in his mind, the image of the large paws resting on the trapdoor forever burned into his memory. "But what could it be guarding?"

"How about whatever someone tried to steal from Gringotts?" Justin suggested, recalling the break-in that Susan had mentioned some time ago. "Even I know now that Hogwarts is just as safe."

"But how did it get here?" Susan asked, trying to make the connection. "And what is it?"

Harry went very red, and Hermione noticed. "I think Harry knows."

"I don't know what Fluffy is guarding." Harry believed in keeping secrets, particularly for someone as important as Dumbledore, and he had a niggling feeling that whatever Fluffy was guarding, was the mysterious item that Hagrid had handed over to Dumbledore during Harry's trip to Diagon Alley with the Headmaster.

Hermione, however, believed just as equally in getting to the bottom of things, and she therefore proceeded to grill Harry. "You went shopping with Dumbledore on the day Gringotts was broken into, didn't you?"

"Yes." Harry started to shift uncomfortably, already working out where Hermione's questioning was going.

"And you went to Gringotts with Professor Dumbledore, didn't you?" Hermione was like a bloodhound honing in on her prey.

"Yes." The word left Harry's lips in a slow sigh.

"Did Professor Dumbledore take something out of Gringotts?" Hermione asked in a triumphant voice, expecting Harry to say yes again.

Harry, however, disappointed her. "No, we just went to my vault, took out my money, and we went shopping afterwards."

"Oh." Hermione's theory went out of the window, and she visibly deflated.

An aficionado of detective novels, courtesy of his mother, Justin was not ready to give up. "So perhaps the Headmaster didn't take anything out when Harry was there. What if the goblins asked him to take care of whatever was hidden in Gringotts before he got Harry, or perhaps Hagrid knows when it got here, seeing as it's his dog guarding the trapdoor?"

Hermione cheered up, and she turned around. "Let's go ask Hagrid."

Harry shook his head. "He probably won't answer us."

"Let's go see." Hermione was determined, but her mission was about to end by Susan.

"I don't think he'll answer the door. Look how anxious he was to get rid of us." Susan slipped her arm through Hermione's so that she was unable to return. "Come on, we should wait for a bit and see what happens. If we can't work out what Fluffy is guarding, then we can come back and visit Hagrid."

Harry tried to dissuade his friends from doing exactly that. "Does it matter what Fluffy is guarding? We're not supposed to be on the third floor where Fluffy is, so why waste our time investigating and hassling Hagrid?"

Hermione had forgotten about the Headmaster's strict warning, and she backed off a little as Harry's words brought it to mind. But deep down, her curiosity was raging and she wanted to know what the three headed beast Harry had seen was safeguarding. "Okay, we'll leave Hagrid alone for the moment then."

However, despite his words about not wasting time pursuing the mystery of the three headed dog, Justin, Susan, and Hermione had no idea that Harry, like them, was also intrigued. After shaking off his friends by pretending he still had homework to do, Harry headed to the library where he penned a missive to Luna Lovegood to ask for her opinion.

Two weeks later

Susan and Justin found Harry sitting at the breakfast table, his concentration fully upon the letter he had received from Luna. He finally realized that someone was calling his name. "Sorry, what is it?"

"I said, is that from Luna?" Susan repeated her earlier question.

"Yes." Harry put the letter down, but he did not tell Susan what it was about.

"And what does she have to say?" Justin sat down, popping a crispy piece of bacon into his mouth.

"She's not writing to me about those snorkie things if that's what you mean." Harry was unable to recall what the animals were called.

"They're called Snorkacks and they might actually be real." Susan had the good grace to blush as she spoke.

"But you said..." Harry's voice trailed off as Susan started talking again.

Susan filled in Harry on what her aunt's reaction had been. "I know but I wrote to Aunt Amy about the Snorkacks, and she had someone investigate it for me."

"Why would the head of BritAD bother with something as unimportant as what we believed was an imaginary animal?" Justin questioned Susan's aunt's actions.

It did not take a genius to work out why Susan's aunt had gone to so much trouble, and Harry scowled. "She did it because I'm the Boy Who Supposedly Lived, didn't she?"

"Yes." Susan shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "But she did find something out."

"So they're real?" Harry was willing to forgive his friend for using him like that if that proved to be the case.

"Not exactly. Aunt Amy said that one of Luna's ancestors, a Reginald Snorkack, claimed to have seen a beast that vanished when startled, when he was touring Scandinavia. Because of that, Aunt Amy thinks that Luna may well have heard of Snorkacks because it's a story that has been passed down her family, and Snorkacks are obviously named after her ancestor," Susan explained in her best 'schoolmarm' voice. "Reginald Snorkack is also the guy who claimed to have discovered Grismacks, tiny flying cats that apparently must have been named after his wife, Elizabeth Grismack, but Aunt Amy's team found nothing to back up that claim, or that they even exist."

"Team?" Harry questioned the plurality of the comment.

"She had a group of people researching it." Susan again looked uncomfortable.

Harry suspected that there was a little more to it than Susan was letting on. "Why an entire team?"

"Because she needs to make sure that anyone you're in contact with is safe," Susan admitted.

"And she didn't once think about checking out my relatives in all the time I lived there?" Harry's question was broadcast in a quiet but acidic voice.

"What do you mean?" Justin knew that Harry did not get along with his relatives, but he had no inkling of how bad things really had been.

Harry did not want to discuss his family's treatment of him, but he answered Justin's question honestly. "Let's just say that they didn't exactly treat me well but it doesn't matter now." He then turned to Susan. "And do not repeat that to your aunt, please."

"I promise I won't." Susan realized that she had once again put her foot in it. "I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't think when I wrote to Aunt Amy."

"It's okay." Harry did not like getting angry with anyone, and he could see that Susan was genuinely upset by her mistake. "At least I know that Luna was not just making it up."

"I'm sorry if I put you off her." Susan again apologized.

Harry made sure Susan knew that she had done nothing of the sort. "You didn't."

"Most people would have been," Susan said, well aware of what her aunt thought about the Lovegood family.

Harry hesitated, and then he revealed something from his childhood. "I'm not most people. I know what it's like to be someone everyone considers a freak or a bit strange. I didn't have any friends in school because everyone thought I was weird."

"I don't think that." Justin tried to cheer up his friend.

"That's because you've never met my cousin Dudley." Harry grimaced. "At my school, if you were friends with me, 'the freak', you got beat up, so up until I started here, I didn't have any friends." Harry glanced at Susan, who was growing more and more upset by the minute. "It's okay, Susan. Even though I'm famous here and people stare at me, it's still loads better than junior school."

"Sorry." Susan couldn't help herself and apologized once more.

"It honestly doesn't matter, Susan," Harry assured her. "I've got friends now."

Susan's eye fell on the letter as Harry lifted it up as he spoke. "So what did Luna have to say?"

"Nothing much." It was now Harry's turn to look uncomfortable.

Justin fixed his friend with a steely glance. "You look embarrassed. So what are you hiding?"

Harry knew he would have to come clean. "I told her about the three headed dog because she seems to know a lot about strange

creatures. She mentioned a lot more creatures in her first letter than just Snorkacks and Grismacks."

"Did she know about the dog?" Susan asked, her previous reticence about Luna now vanishing.

"I'll tell you when Hermione arrives." Harry glanced over at the door, having expected their friend sooner, Hermione having been given permission to sit with the trio at breakfast.

A few minutes later Hermione came in and sat down. "Sorry I'm late. I was watching George doing his Arithmancy homework. It's really interesting."

"But how can you understand it? You've never taken it before," Justin pointed out. "And it's a third year subject."

"I was interested, and George took the time to show me how it worked." Hermione defended her interest.

The Hufflepuff trio shared a restrained grin, which thankfully Hermione, who had bowed her head and gone red, missed. Ever since Halloween, Hermione had attached herself to George, and it was apparent, even to Harry and Justin, that Hermione had a massive crush on the older boy. Justin grinned at Hermione when she finally looked up again. "He's your hero isn't he?"

"No." Hermione glowered at Justin, her face turning even redder. "It's just nice that someone in Gryffindor will speak to me, let alone risk their life to save me." She suddenly realized that Harry had taken what she had said in the wrong way as his face fell. "Not that you didn't try, Harry."

"I was useless." Harry got up. "I'll see you all later."

The group was used to Harry suddenly disappearing whenever he felt threatened or uncomfortable, and Justin watched his friend vanish. "Darn it, he was about to tell us about Luna's letter and hopefully the dog."

"Shall I go after him?" Susan offered, guilt eating at her for having made yet another misstep.

Justin shook his head. "Nah. He's still angry with himself that he didn't save Hermione before anyone got hurt."

"He did his best." Hermione defended her absent friend's efforts. "But that was a big troll, and it wasn't Harry's fault that he froze at first."

"I'd have fainted," Justin admitted. "But then again, I don't have the stigma of being the Boy Who Lived following me around."

"Let's go find him." Hermione was not going to let Harry mope over his failure to initially act. Getting up, the three children went in search of their friend, Hermione grabbing several slices of toast to eat as she went. She just hoped that they could persuade Harry that despite everyone's expectations of him, he was only a first year, and that there had been nothing that he could have done differently.

They found Harry in the bleachers watching the Hufflepuff team practicing for their next match against Gryffindor. Susan sat down by Harry. "Harry, you don't have to keep running away from us. We're your friends, even if I am a stupid one, and we'll always support you."

Harry immediately leapt to his friend's defense against herself. "You're not stupid, Susan."

"Yes, I am." Susan was only too well aware that, even though she did not mean any harm, she often spoke before thinking. "I should never have told you what the wizarding world thinks of the Lovegoods, nor should I have told Aunt Amy that you're writing to Luna. And even worse, I know I upset Hagrid when I was rude about his dog."

"You just didn't think. What I did was worse." Harry stared hard at the bench in front of him. "Malfoy was right when he said I was useless. I should have done more to help Hermione and George. Instead I just stood there, and they got hurt."

"Harry, you were really brave. Most people would not have even bothered to try and help." Hermione sat down on the other side of Harry. "You saved both me and George."

"I wasn't brave. I had no idea what I was doing, and....," Harry protested, only to be interrupted mid-sentence.

Hermione folded her arms and glared at Harry. "Right, you've moped long enough, Harry Potter. You are a brave, loyal, and good friend, and..."

As Hermione began to lecture Harry, he let his mind wander back to the day of Halloween.

31st October 1991

It was the morning of Halloween, and as the group left Charms, Hermione slightly ahead of them, she could hear Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom talking. As the boys' conversation continued, Hermione realized that they were talking about her.

Ron's voice was rather loud, also allowing Harry, Justin, and Susan to overhear what was being said. "Swish and flick." Ron's voice was mocking. "Trust Granger to bloody well get it right first time." He mimicked his teacher. "Oh well done, Miss Granger, well done. Bloody know-it-all."

Hermione was used to hurtful words about her achievements; she had had to listen to similar comments all of her life, but it still upset her that someone from her own house was knocking what she had done, especially as she had earned five points for Gryffindor.

As Hermione stopped in dismay, Susan reached her and put her arm around the girl. And Harry, who although he did not like confrontations, felt the need to defend his friend, and he marched up to Ron, tapping him on the shoulder. "Weasley."

Ron turned around, his face lighting up at the sight of Harry. "Hi, mate."

"I'm not your mate." Harry knew from George that Ron had been angling to be formally introduced to Harry. "How could you be so rude about Hermione? She earned your house points today."

"She was just showing off." Neville joined in with the conversation. "She always does. She never lets anyone else have a chance to shine."

While Hermione had expected Ron to run her down, she had not expected to hear it from the usually timid Neville. "I didn't do it on purpose. I was just doing what the Professor told us to do."

"Yeah, right." Ron's tone indicated that he did not believe Hermione. "You really think you're special because you do well in classes and your Potter's friend. He's probably only friends with you so that he can copy your work." Ron had often seen Hermione going over Harry's work in the library, and it was pure jealousy that was driving Ron's words, mostly because Ron could not get help like that, as well as the fact that Hermione was Harry's friend and not his.

Hermione refused to believe that Harry was her friend only for her brains, and she therefore stood up for her Hufflepuff friend. "That's not true."

"Look at Potter," Neville said to Hermione, "and tell me it's not true."

Hermione glanced at Harry to see that he had turned red, and thinking it was from shame, she burst into tears and fled before anyone could stop her.

Harry scowled at the two Gryffindors; his red face had been from anger at Ron and Neville and not embarrassment. "How could you? I'm Hermione's friend because I like her. And you had better not have ruined my friendship with her just because you suck at Charms and she doesn't." Harry then directed his next comment at Ron. "Oh, and don't ever call me your mate again, because I'm not, Weasley, and nor will I ever be."

Shaking inside, Harry had hated the confrontation but he was also proud that he had managed to defend both himself and his friend. He turned to Justin and Susan, hoping his voice was not betraying his inner turmoil. "Let's go find our friend." After giving Ron and Neville several distinctly dark and dirty looks, Justin and Susan followed Harry in the direction that Hermione had taken.

However, none of them could find her, and the trio had had to give up when classes began. As dinnertime came around there was still no sign of Hermione, and the trio had headed into the Great Hall, which had been decorated for Halloween. Usually such a display

would have delighted the three children but their pleasure was marred by the fact that Hermione was still missing.

Susan's sharp hearing, however, gave the small group a clue as to where Hermione had gotten to. "Harry, I just overheard Parvati say to her sister that Hermione is in the girls' bathroom down by the entrance to the dungeons."

"I can't go into a girls' bathroom," Harry pointed out unnecessarily. "Will you check on her after dinner? I'll put together some food for her."

"I was going to go now." The words had barely left Susan's mouth when Professor Quirrell came running into the Hall. "Troll... in the dungeons." He then collapsed to the ground in an apparent faint. The entire Hall exploded into pandemonium, which the Headmaster quickly quelled. Teachers were ordered to go with him to hunt down the troll, and prefects were ordered to take the houses to safety, Slytherin being told to head towards the library.

George, like Susan, had overheard Parvati's conversation, and he cornered Ron and Neville. "I heard what you two did to Hermione Granger. And she's got no idea of what's happening because of you pair."

"That's her problem." Ron had no intention of risking his skin for Hermione. "She shouldn't have been such a show off."

"I'm going to find a teacher." George looked around but with Albus' decree that the teachers should follow him, the Hall was now empty and even Quirrell had mysteriously disappeared. "Dammit. Ron, we're going to find her."

"No way." Ron backed away into Fred, who had come back to see what had happened to his twin.

When he found out what George was planning to do, Fred was pissed with Ron. "George is right, Ronnie. You owe Granger."

"She's a know-it-all." Ron tried to defend himself.

"And she's also a Gryffindor," George pointed out. "What about if it had been Ginny?" George mentioned his younger sister, who was due to start at Hogwarts the next year.

Aware that he was cornered, Ron reluctantly agreed to accompany his siblings. "I'll come."

George turned at a tap on his shoulder to find Harry, Susan, and Justin standing behind him. "What?"

"We're all coming with you as well." Susan took the lead. "Hermione's our friend."

"Susan, you're not going. It's too dangerous." George had no intention of taking a girl along. "Justin, make sure Susan doesn't follow us."

George then looked around for Ron. But he had vanished as, despite his words, Ron had made the most of George's distraction to vanish with Neville. So instead, George turned to his twin. "Fred, find us some teachers, just in case. We're heading towards the girls' bathroom by the dungeons."

"Hey, you can't..." Susan's words ended as Justin grabbed her arm, and she turned angrily on him.

The three boys took advantage of Susan's arguing with Justin to leave without her. All three boys hesitated, but only for a moment, when Percy, the twins' older brother, and a prefect, starting yelling at them. "Where do you think you're going?"

"See you later, Percy. Don't wait up," Fred yelled over his shoulder, and all three boys continued on their way, Percy's yells that he was a prefect and they had to go with him, echoing around them. "I'll be as quick as I can." Fred then turned away from the direction of the dungeons.

"I thought the teachers were in the dungeons," Harry pointed out.

"He knows a shortcut." George picked up the pace. "Come on, the bathroom is just up here."

Harry and George had not gotten far when the most awful smell assaulted their nostrils and Harry began to gag. "What on earth is that?"

"Troll." George had never smelt one before but he knew that they smelt bad, and whatever lay ahead of them most certainly did not smell of roses.

A scream of fear shifted the boys into action, and they raced towards the noise. On entering the bathroom, Harry's heart felt as if it had stopped as he laid eyes on the big, gray, knobbly, and foul smelling eight foot behemoth in front of him. He would have normally closed his eyes but they had locked with Hermione's, who was standing flattened against the far wall, the troll standing over her, and now he found he was unable to look away.

George barked out an urgent direction. "Hermione, get out of the way."

Hermione neither moved nor acknowledged George in any way, terror robbing her of her motor skills. George aimed his wand at the troll. "Stupefy." Nothing happened, the spell bouncing off the troll. The troll did, however, turn around and raise its club, as if it could reach George from eight feet away.

George knew by now that Hermione was not moving, and he started to head towards her, only for the club to come swinging towards him. "Harry, distract it," George yelled out as he dodged the large club. Harry, like Hermione, did not move, and the troll took a swipe at George again as he dodged around the troll. As the club impacted a toilet door, sending thousands of splinters into the air and narrowly missing George, Hermione found her voice again and she screamed in fear.

Unfortunately Hermione's scream drew the troll's attention back to her, and it swung the club at her. Aware that Hermione was not going to move, George did the only thing he could think of at that moment and dove in front of Hermione, placing himself in the club's path. George yelled out in pain when the club impacted his body, breaking several of his ribs, and sending him smashing into Hermione. And then George fell silent as did Hermione, the force behind the club driving them both into the wall, the dual soft crunches telling Harry that the pair had hit their heads.

As everything went silent, Harry stood in the doorway, fear for his friends rolling over him as the troll raised its club again, intending to ensure that its victims were truly dead. Harry could feel his heart rate increasing, and he glanced hopefully behind him but even though he could hear voices getting closer, the owners of them obviously were not going to make it in time. Not knowing what else to do, Harry finally reacted and pulled out his wand. Thinking quickly about what spell he could use, Harry realized that he had to get the troll away from his friends. It was just bringing the club down when Harry opened his mouth and screamed out what he hoped was the ideal spell, fear and adrenalin pushing far more power into the spell than would normally be the case. "Accio troll."

The group of teachers, who had been alerted by Fred, ran up to the door just in time to see a massive troll flying through the air towards the wall. All of them winced as the troll smashed into the wall, a loud crack signifying that it had smacked its head quite sharply. Harry, who had ducked when he realized that the troll was going to fly into him, moved quickly out of the way as the troll fell forward. Only then did he turn to face the teachers, Minerva breaking free from the group to check that Harry was in one piece. "Are you alright?"

"F..f..fine." Harry stammered the word out. "But Hermione and George..." Harry did not finish his sentence, instead pointing to the pair that no-one had really taken any notice of until then, their attention solely on Harry and the troll.

Minerva, Severus, and Albus moved forward, and a short time later, the injured children were safely ensconced in the hospital wing, and the troll had been dealt with.

Present Time

Hermione, who had now finished lecturing Harry, took Harry's hand. "...and at the end of the day, what matters most is that you saved us. The teachers would have been too late."

"But I still froze at first, Hermione," Harry said, guilt at what had happened to her and George still a main factor in his protests.

"And what did I do, Harry?" Hermione asked. She then went on before Harry could say anything. "I froze. Completely froze. And it's

because I froze, not you, that George jumped in the way and got hurt. And you could have run off to get the teachers, but you didn't. You stayed and did what I couldn't. You took on the troll."

As Harry thought about what Hermione had said, he finally had to admit that although he had been frightened and running on adrenalin, he could have left George and Hermione. A small smile crossed his face. "I suppose I did."

Sneakily watching Hufflepuff's practice session from under the bleachers, two boys had been listening to the conversation, but both remained silent as Harry finally acknowledged the truth. They continued to listen as the subjects of Luna Lovegood and a three headed dog were brought up. According to Luna, it turned out that the dog was known as a Cerberus. The two boys filed this information away, and only once Harry and his three friends had left, did the boys dare to say anything.

Neville was frowning. "I thought Potter was a real hero but he's just a fraud."

Ron had to be a little kinder, especially as George and Fred had kept quiet about Ron's involvement in the incident, saving him from a roasting from his parents, who had been called to the school when George was in the infirmary. "Yeah but Potter still saved George's life."

Both boys had conveniently forgotten that it was their fault that George had had to risk his life in the first place, as Neville went on. "He got lucky. I'm sure we could have done it."

"Yeah, we could." Ron was not so sure but he would never admit it to Neville, and he hurriedly changed the subject to that of the Cerberus. "What do you suppose this dog is guarding?"

"I have no idea." Neville shook his head as he responded. "And why would it be guarding something here? Why not just put it in Gringotts?"

"I dunno," Ron replied. "Bill always says that Gringotts is practically impossible to break into."

Ron's words stirred something in Neville's mind. Everyone considered Neville stupid because he was not magically talented but that was far from the case, as he proved now. "Do you think it's guarding whatever supposedly was not taken from Gringotts in that break-in, you know, the one that happened just before school started?"

"Of course. Hogwarts is the next safest place in the world, and the Headmaster is here." Ron clapped Neville on the back. "So we've just got to find out what that dog thing is guarding, and we'll be able to prove to that know-it-all that she isn't the cleverest person in our year."

Neville's face became alight with pleasure. "And I can show everyone what it's like to be really brave. Not like Potter."

Happy with themselves and their plan, the two boys set off for the library.

Next Chapter: Harry's hope for anonymity fades even more as he has yet another run-in with Malfoy but this time it has unexpected results.

Note: Just a few additional sentences and some grammatical changes.

Chapter 8: A Snitch in the Hand

November 30th 1991

After the game between Hufflepuff and Gryffindor ended, Harry and his friends headed up from the quidditch pitch, three of them feeling a little despondent. Only Hermione was smiling, not because Gryffindor had won but because George had played well. In fact, not being a fan of quidditch, George had been the only reason Hermione had gone to watch the match. And even though George was the antithesis of everything she knew should be seeking in a boy, she still had a terrible crush on him. Seeing how downcast the trio was, Hermione tried to make them feel better. "I'm sorry that Hufflepuff lost. They did try hard."

"Thanks but I know you're glad that your team won." Susan believed quite wrongly that Hermione was just being polite.

Justin also believed the same but he directed his ire elsewhere. "If only the teachers hadn't changed the playing order this year, I'm sure we'd have done much better against Ravenclaw." Usually Hufflepuff played Ravenclaw first, but a run of injuries in the Ravenclaw team during practice had forced an early change, leaving Hufflepuff to play Ravenclaw in mid-February. And even though he was a Muggleborn, Justin had taken to the game like a duck to water, and he had pretty much memorized everything about it, including the playing order.

"At least your team will have a chance to practice before they face Ravenclaw," Hermione sensibly pointed out.

"I suppose you're right." Harry was not quite as into quidditch as Justin, but even he had hoped that his house's team would have done better.

A loud snort reached the ears of the group. "They could practice until the end of the time and they would still lose, Potter. Summerby can't seek to save his life."

Aware that Draco was deliberately trying to bait him, Harry sighed as he turned around to face his nemesis. "Just go away, Malfoy."

"The truth hurts, doesn't it, Potter?" Draco smirked, knowing it would irritate Harry, and he then denigrated Gregory Summerby again. "And the truth is that Hufflepuff's seeker sucks."

Unlike Harry, Justin simply could not ignore Draco, and before Harry could respond, Justin snapped out an irate rejoinder. "It's not as if you could do any better."

"You don't think so?" Draco challenged Justin's statement.

"No." Justin mockingly shook his head. "You're all mouth, Malfoy."

"No, I'm not." Draco was not exactly lying. Growing up he had practiced flying quite a bit in the grounds of Malfoy Manor. "Because unlike you, I can actually fly well enough to catch a snitch, which is more than can be said for Summerby." Due to a back injury, Hufflepuff's seeker, Greg Summerby had had to be carried off the pitch, and the snitch had been caught by Gryffindor's usually inept seeker before Hufflepuff could field their reserve, Cedric Diggory.

Justin defended his house's seeker. "Greg would have won the match for us if he hadn't hurt himself."

"Just face the truth, losers." Draco was flanked by his laughing friends as he started to walk off. "Summerby is a shit seeker. Any neither he, nor anyone else in your house, will ever be able to catch a snitch."

Draco had barely taken more than ten steps when Susan blurted out a comeback. "I bet that Harry could catch a snitch." Unfortunately Susan had no real idea of Harry's capabilities, since she was basing her claim solely on the fact that she had decided that Harry looked at home on a broomstick, ergo he would eventually be an excellent flier.

Harry thought differently from Susan. Bad weather had resulted in the cancellation of more than one of their flying lessons that year, meaning that Harry had only had four lessons. So, not wanting Draco to overhear him, he hissed quietly at Susan from the corner of his mouth. "You know I couldn't. I've hardly had any lessons."

Unfortunately Draco had not walked far enough away and caught Harry's aside. "See, even he knows he's crap. I mean he's barely even gotten off the ground."

"Get stuffed," Justin butted in, before Susan could defend Harry again. "Just because Harry doesn't show off like some, it doesn't mean that he can't fly or catch a snitch."

"Prove it," Draco demanded, as he walked back towards the group.

Fed up with the Slytherin's constant whining and bragging, Justin was not going to let this one go. "We will."

Aware it would have something to do with him if Justin got his way, Harry went to break into the discussion to tell the boys to count him out, only for Severus Snape, who literally seemed to materialize out of nowhere, to interrupt the proceedings. "What's going on?"

Draco turned to his head of house. "Potter was just claiming to be a better flier than me."

"No, he w... Ouch!" Hermione's protest ended with a bark of pain as Harry stepped on her foot to make her shut up. He did not want Snape turning his attention on Hermione, who had already said that the Potions Master derided her in class.

Harry's abrupt manner of dealing with Hermione worked, Severus scowling at Harry instead. "So we're showing off again, are we, Potter?"

"No, Professor." Harry denied it. "We were just having a discussion about Hufflepuff's seeker."

"Mr. Malfoy?" Severus' tone more or less inferred that he did not believe Harry.

"Potter didn't think I'd be any good as a seeker, Sir." Addressing his head of house in a deferential tone, Draco knew he was stirring things up. "And he and his friends seemed to think that Potter would be a better flier as well."

Severus did not care whether this was the truth or not, holding up his hand as both Susan and Justin went to protest. "In that case I

think we should show Potter just how competent you are on a broom. At the same time we can find out exactly how good of a flier Potter really is."

"I don't think I'm any good, Professor." Harry hurriedly refuted his level of skill, afraid of where this was going to lead.

Severus ignored Harry's repudiation, deciding to use the opportunity to embarrass Harry. "On Sunday morning you and Mr. Malfoy will both present yourselves at the quidditch pitch at 9am." After issuing his decree, Severus began to walk off, only to stop and make one final comment. "And do bring a broom." After flashing Harry a smirk, Draco followed in his teacher's footsteps.

Harry had hoped to be able to get some practice in before the threatened Sunday morning. But it seemed to Harry that Snape had deliberately taken great delight in piling ever more homework onto him and his classmates, which meant that Harry's spare time had been eaten up in trying to get the work completed on time. Therefore when Sunday morning rolled round, Harry had barely even looked at a broomstick, let alone flew on one, and he was now sitting at the breakfast table, his stomach churning. "I can't do this."

"You have to," Hermione chided him, as she joined her friends at the Hufflepuff table for breakfast. "Everyone wants to see you beat Malfoy."

"Just how many people are going to watch me make an idiot of myself?" Unbeknown to him, Harry's face reflected the terror and worry he was feeling.

Having spent the last half an hour in the common room trying to calm Harry down, Susan glared at Hermione when she realized that all of her efforts had now gone to waste. "To think it's usually me who puts my foot in it!"

Hermione had the good grace to go red. "Sorry, I thought he knew."

"Well, he didn't, and your telling him has only made things worse." After berating her friend for her insensitivity, Susan turned to Harry and began to treat her worried friend exactly as her aunt often dealt with her when she was upset. "Don't worry about who will be watching, Harry. I know you're going to do well." Susan piled some

bacon and sausage onto Harry's plate. "Right now, you need to try and eat something. You'll feel better if you do."

Harry was not going to let Susan distract him. "How many people, Susan?"

Aware that Susan would not tell Harry the truth, and believing that Harry should be forewarned now that Hermione had spilled the beans, Justin offered up the information instead. "Pretty much the whole school. And apparently some people are even taking bets on you winning." Justin sensibly refrained from telling Harry that he himself had placed a five galleon bet on Harry to win with Eric Lestrade, a fifth year Ravenclaw and the school's underground bookie. And it was Lestrade who had somehow discovered that Snape's intention was to hold a competition between the two boys, and he had subsequently leaked this information to the rest of the school, resulting in a flurry of betting.

It was probably a good thing that Harry knew nothing about the illegal betting. He was already full of anxiety, and Justin's announcement about the whole school witnessing the showdown had made Harry want to run and hide. He did not do that though. Instead he groaned, and dropped his head onto the table. "I want to die."

"No, you don't," Hermione remarked firmly, and, taking a leaf out of Susan's book, she also tried to persuade Harry to partake of the food in front of him. "Now eat up. Malfoy is."

Harry glanced over at the Slytherin table where it appeared that Draco was not suffering from the same nerves Harry was. As Harry watched him, the Slytherin speared a slice of bacon from a somewhat overflowing breakfast plate. "But he can fly."

"So can you." Having brought *Hogwarts: A History* to breakfast with her, Hermione opened up the book to a page where a leather bookmark was poking out at the top, and she then pointed to a moving photo. "Look at this, Harry."

Harry glanced across at the page Hermione wanted him to see. Due to his overabundance of homework, the page was in a section of the book that Harry had not yet reached in his reading, and he read aloud the caption below the photo that Hermione's finger was resting

on. "James Potter, Chaser and Captain, Gryffindor – Winners of the House Cup 1977 and 1978."

Harry's attention was now entirely focused the photo, which depicted a bespectacled young man who wore what could only be described as a cocky grin similar to one that Harry had often seen Draco displaying. Despite that, Harry could not tear his eyes away from the photo as the young man in it repeatedly threw a snitch into the air and then reached out to grab it, his fingers curling around it and dragging it back towards him just as it appeared that he would lose it. His heart pounding, Harry finally looked up at Hermione. "That's my Dad, isn't it?"

"Yes. So you see, Harry, flying is in your blood, and..." Hermione's intended pep talk ended abruptly when she spotted tears in Harry's eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's just that I've never seen a picture of my Dad before." Harry was unable to prevent the tear that ran down his cheek.

A tear that Draco, who had gotten up to taunt Harry about their impending match, noticed. "Already crying about losing, Potter?"

Hermione immediately slammed the book shut, not wanting Draco to see what had really upset Harry. "Get lost, Malfoy."

Susan also reiterated Hermione's comment, making Draco laugh and mock Harry once more. "Girls defending you again, Potter? They're not going to be able to help you when you're on that crappy broom, and I'm winning." Draco nodded towards the borrowed Cleansweep Seven that was sitting at Harry's side; Draco was using a Nimbus 2000 that he had negotiated to borrow from one of the Slytherin chasers.

"I won't need the girls to defend me, Malfoy, and this broom isn't crappy. It's brilliant, and I'm going to use it to grind you into the dirt." Furious that Draco had ruined a precious moment in his life, Harry got to his feet, grabbed the broomstick, and stormed off, leaving Draco standing openmouthed with shock that Harry had acted so aggressively towards him, and the Great Hall in all of a twitter at Harry's uncharacteristic behavior.

By the time 9am arrived, Harry's anger had dissipated. Now nerves had taken anger's place, and Harry was shaking as he stood on the quidditch pitch, the borrowed broom clutched tightly in his right hand, and his heart pounding so loudly that he was sure everyone could hear it. And by everyone, he meant everyone, for it appeared that the entire school, including the teachers, had come to view the play-off between the two boys. Finding the crowd overwhelming, Harry tried not to look around too much but when his eyes fell upon his guardian, who was sitting next to the Headmaster in the teachers' box, he managed to dredge up a tiny smile for her.

After giving Harry a very brief smile in return, Minerva leant closer to Albus, keeping her voice low so that it did not carry to the other teachers around them. "If Harry is humiliated, I'll never forgive you." Minerva had been furious when she had learnt what Severus had done, since despite the fact that she only saw Harry for lessons and every Wednesday evening for a few hours, she had become quite protective of the young boy. Her anger had been exacerbated when Albus had overruled her objections, allowing the competition to continue, and she had barely spoken a word to him all week.

Albus had weathered the storm though, aware that his friend and colleague would eventually capitulate and speak to him. "I'm quite sure that Harry will do the Potter name proud." Like Hermione, Albus believed that the young boy was up to the challenge.

Minerva did not get a chance to respond because Severus chose that moment to stroll onto the pitch, and without preamble he began to explain the challenge. "I have seven snitches. The winner of this challenge, and therefore the superior flier, is the person who catches the most snitches."

Anything else that Severus might have said went over Harry's head because Harry had noticed other students joining them. And Harry swallowed hard when he realized that the new arrivals represented the beaters from the four houses, and, just as they would in a proper game of quidditch, Harry had a horrible feeling that he and Draco would be the targets. As the whistle blew and Harry started to rise into the air, he discovered that he was not wrong about his suspicions when almost immediately a bludger flew towards him, forcing Harry back down towards the ground. "Dammit."

Draco was not such an easy target, since the moment the whistle had blown, the Slytherin had literally shot into the air and out of immediate danger. Once Draco was sure that he was comfortably situated, he began to fly around Harry, sneering loudly at him. "You suck, Potter."

"Just go away, Malfoy." Trying to regain the ground the bludger had forced him to yield, Harry had been clinging tightly to the broomstick when he had suddenly wobbled precariously, and because of this distraction, Harry's riposte had held little force.

It would not have mattered if it had. Draco had no intention of giving up on his Harry baiting, and he laughed when he noticed how white Harry's knuckles were. "Scared you're going to fall off, Potter?"

"You wish." Harry flung the words at him, and, even though he was convinced he was going to fall off the broomstick and die, he defiantly matched Draco when the boy flew ever higher.

"You're right, I do." Draco's reply left Harry in no doubt how the Slytherin felt about him.

Harry, however, did not bother to respond to Draco since all of his concentration was focused on just staying on the broomstick, particularly as the people on the ground were growing smaller and smaller as he got higher and higher. "I can do this. I can do this."

"In your dreams, Potter," Draco mocked. "You suck at flying, and I bet your father is rolling over in his grave."

Harry knew then that despite Hermione's move to slam shut the book, Draco had obviously seen what had upset Harry at breakfast. And now, upset by the truth behind Draco's words, Harry's voice quavered as he uttered a quiet entreaty. "Just leave me alone."

Harry's eyes were suspiciously watery so Draco ignored Harry's demand. "Boo hoo. Potter's going to cry again because he's not as good as his dead Daddy."

Draco's teasing had the opposite effect to the one he had hoped for. Instead of bursting into tears, Harry's anger suddenly returned in full

force, and he pushed back his shoulders and did something he rarely did, he swore. "Fuck you, Malfoy!"

Stunned at Harry's language, Draco did not respond straightaway, and Harry could not help the small shiver of pleasure that trickled through him at the look on Draco's face. After getting no immediate comeback, Harry boldly challenged Draco. "Keep up if you can."

Then, even though he had no idea if he would fall off, or even if he was about to do the right thing, Harry bent low over his broomstick, just as he had seen members of the Hufflepuff team do during practice. When the broomstick accelerated away from the still surprised Slytherin, Harry found himself repeating his earlier words. "I can do this. I can do this." Only this time, Harry's words weren't nervous, they were forceful and full of self-conviction.

With Harry pulling away from him, Draco was unable to think of a retort he could use to mock Harry, and he therefore chose not to pursue his opponent. Also several bludgers were now coming directly for him, courtesy of the Weasley twins, and Draco had to dodge them to avoid being knocked from his broomstick. After righting himself, Draco spotted a glint of gold below where Harry was currently flying, and he headed back down towards it.

Harry, who had also spotted the snitch, did not even attempt to go after it, as for the first time he could ever remember, he realized that he actually felt at peace. And, with the sound of the wind in his ears and the cold winter sun in his eyes, Harry realized that Hermione had been right, flying was in his blood. Ignoring his mission, Harry flew aimlessly in circles, his only real effort was made to avoid stray bludgers. And he had a smile on his face as he relished a world which, at that moment, apart from the odd errant missile, consisted of only him, his broomstick, and the sky.

Harry's solitude was disturbed when a whirring noise startled him, and he glanced to his left to see what was making the strange sound. He soon discovered the culprit: a golden snitch, its little wings beating furiously to keep itself aloft, was hovering less than a foot away from him. Instinct took over, and, just as he had seen his father doing in the photo, Harry snaked out his hand far quicker than he could have imagined possible and attempted to end the snitch's journey. The instant his fingers closed securely around the small,

cold object a futile struggle began, but it was soon over, and as it powered down, the snitch was deposited in Harry's pocket.

Zippering up his pocket, groans of disappointment reached Harry's ears. However, it was mere microseconds later when the groans were obliterated by the sounds of cheering. Harry presumed that Draco must have caught the glinting object they had both spotted before Harry had become lost in the sensations of his first real flight. It was then that Harry's detachment vanished as he realized that this contest was not just about him, it was about his friends and his house, and he could not let them down by allowing Draco to win. He again uttered his mantra for that morning. "I can do this."

And with his mindset now altered, Harry began to actively seek out the remaining snitches, his change of heart being rewarded when, after just a few minutes, Harry spotted a snitch less than twenty feet below him. Then it vanished from sight as it disappeared into the low lying cloud that hid the crowd from Harry's sight and him from them. He had not hidden well enough though, because as he aimed his broom downwards, Harry had to dart between two bludgers that had suddenly broken through the cloud cover, before following his prey into those very same clouds. Wet and shivering, Harry still grinned happily when, in spite of the chilly conditions and being unable to see inside the dense clouds, Harry's sharp hearing caught the sound of fluttering. Just as the clouds began to thin, Harry's fingers closed around yet another target, and he pocketed his second snitch.

Moments later he left the clouds behind, and Harry finally came back into the view of the general populace. And they, currently having no idea about Harry's treasures, groaned once more when Draco took yet another snitch. However, Draco's vanity was about to be his downfall as, with Slytherin's cheers ringing in his ears, Draco spotted Harry and he could not resist showing off. He lifted the newly captured snitch aloft, Slytherin's cheers growing louder as he did so, and, while Draco lapped up the admiration his house was showering upon him, Harry began scanning the area for more snitches.

Irritated by Draco's egotism, Harry did not try to stop the smirk that crossed his face when he noticed that there was yet another snitch fluttering less than five feet behind his adversary that Draco had yet to spot, the cheers of Slytherin drowning out the sound of the snitch's wings. Determined to beat his snotty adversary, Harry was

not about to let such an opportunity go to waste, and he bent low over his broomstick to pick up speed, heading directly for Draco and his quarry.

"Malfoy!" One of the Slytherin beaters, whose name Harry did not know, screamed anxiously at Draco but it was too late. Just as Draco turned to see why Henry Bole had yelled out his name and was gesturing behind him, Harry shot by the would-be seeker, reaching out to successfully pluck his target from the air. The crowd went wild when they realized that Harry was not out of the game yet.

Harry, however, had little time to enjoy his own triumph since another snitch had appeared, and once again the chase was on. Slightly at a disadvantage, having shot past Draco in gaining his third snitch, Harry had to brake sharply before turning and starting to head for the snitch that would seal his victory. Unfortunately, Harry's journey was about to be impeded by a bludger that an angry Bole had sent at him, a bludger Harry would be unable to avoid if he wanted to reach the snitch in time to stop Draco from claiming the prize. And Harry was determined that no matter what, this snitch was going to be his.

Draco laughed out loud in triumph when Harry's single-mindedness was rewarded by the bludger smacking into Harry's leg just before Harry reached the snitch. And Draco's delight burgeoned even more when he realized that not only had the bludger injured Harry's leg, but it had also caused Harry to lose his grip on his broomstick. Uncaring about his opponent's predicament, Draco did not make any attempt to help when Harry began to thrash his arms in the air as he desperately tried to remain upright. It was a battle that Harry could not win, and shortly thereafter Harry parted company with his ride. Believing that the snitch was now his, Draco gleefully headed towards it but his mirth was to be cut short. Almost unbelievably, at exactly the same time that Harry fell from his broomstick, the small prey changed direction and began heading, together with Harry, down towards the ground. Cursing loudly, Draco immediately bent low over his broomstick and began to pursue the two of them.

Having spotted the snitch's change of direction as he slipped off his broomstick, Harry was almost oblivious about his impending demise as he tried to catch the winged ball that was keeping pace with him. And if the wind had not been rushing by his ears, Harry would have heard Draco give a scream of rage as the snitch disappeared from

view and into Harry's hand. It was only then that the crowds' screams registered fully in Harry's mind, and he realized that he was about to die. However, Harry's imminent death was delayed when his downward spiral was stopped by the owners of two broomsticks placing themselves in Harry's path, the momentum of Harry hitting the broomsticks almost forcing the three boys into the ground.

As Harry lay panting across their broomsticks with two arms wrapped around him to ensure that he would not slip off, the Weasley twins grinned at him and spoke together. "Got a death wish, Harry?"

Even though the thought 'I'm going to die' had shot through Harry's mind just after grabbing the snitch, it was only then that the reality of what could have happened to him finally hit Harry. And with the adrenalin of trying to reach the snitch long gone, Harry suddenly found he was unable to speak. The twins understood only too well how this felt, having had a few close calls themselves, and they refrained from teasing Harry as they maneuvered their brooms to the ground, which was now only five feet or so below them.

Severus made his way over to the three boys the moment they landed, and he addressed Harry, his voice oily and full of palpable gratification. "Are you forfeiting the match, Potter?"

With the twins help, Harry stood unsteadily, his injured leg making it difficult, and he faced his most hated professor, his voice returning as he slid his hand into his pocket to check on his bounty. "No, Professor."

"Then I suggest you get back on your broom, wherever it is." Sniggers accompanied Severus' comment, for the broomstick in question was currently still in the air, making lazy circles under its own power as it slowly descended. "Otherwise you've lost the contest."

"I don't need to get back on it, Professor." Harry pulled out the three snitches from his pocket one by one, adding them to the one still tightly grasped in his hand. "I have four snitches."

Severus' look of pleasure vanished. "Impossible."

"Let me see those snitches, Mr. Potter." Mara Hooch, who had agreed to act as an impartial referee, took the now dormant snitches from Harry and checked them over. Before the match, she had marked them with an ornate 'MH' so that no cheating could occur. After finishing her inspection, Mara savored a very pleasurable moment when she realized that Harry had indeed beaten Draco. Wanting to share that feeling with the rest of the crowd, Mara touched her throat and uttered a spell to enhance the volume of her voice. "Harry Potter wins!"

Screams of delight roared through the quidditch stands as three houses expressed their delight. Draco ignored their happiness as he landed beside Harry. "He must have cheated. There's no way he could have beaten me. I demand a rematch."

"There will be no rematch, Mr. Malfoy." Mara stood firm. "Mr. Potter won fairly. Now I suggest you shake hands with him."

Draco, however, chose to storm off, and Mara muttered something about bad sportsmanship under her breath. Feeling on top of the world, Harry did not care about Malfoy, and he was about to say something to the flying teacher to that effect when Susan flung herself at him, almost bowling him over. "You were wonderful, Harry."

Harry's newly discovered confidence instantly deflated. Unlike flying, affectionate gestures did not come naturally to Harry, mostly because he had no memory of ever being hugged before. He therefore stiffly wrapped his arms around Susan, before quickly letting go. "I just did my best."

"That's very modest, Harry." Pomona Sprout, who had hurried to join the victor, was beaming from ear to ear with pride. "You were quite outstanding. You caught four snitches in less than thirty minutes, and your last capture was going above and beyond the call of duty. Your father would have been proud."

After Draco's spiteful reference to his father, Pomona's praise almost undid Harry, and he started to tear up again, dropping his head so that no-one could see the tears that he was fighting to hold back. "Thanks, Professor."

Fred, who had remained at Harry's side, unwittingly helped Harry out when he changed the flow of the conversation with a question. "So when will Slytherin be facing you on the quidditch pitch, Harry?"

George also wanted to know the answer to that. "Yeah, Harry, when?"

Even though Harry had adored the flying and had been caught up in the thrill of the chase, he did not really want anything to do with quidditch. And now that he had had a moment to recover himself, Harry's voice was clear of any tears as he reminded the twins of the school rules, before they got any wild ideas about Harry's future. "I'm too young."

However, it was already too late for Harry. Fred's question had made a light bulb go off in Pomona's head, and she disappeared from the group. Harry did not notice since he was now being engulfed by his housemates all wanting to congratulate him and asking the same sort of questions as Fred had. Harry was still fending off questions when, twenty minutes after she had left, Pomona returned, and she had to try and push her way through the crowd to reach Harry. Raising her voice a little, Pomona made a polite but firm demand. "Can I have a little room, please?"

The crowd immediately parted, granting Pomona access to Harry. "I have good news for you, Harry."

Harry could see that whatever the news was, it had made his teacher very happy. "What is it?"

Pomona's face was full of pride and pleasure as she made her announcement. "Harry, I've just spoken to the Headmaster, and he's agreed to allow you to play for Hufflepuff in the seeker's position for the rest of this year."

"But what about Greg Summerby?" Harry protested quickly, his brain trying to come up with an excuse as to why he could not accept the position. "And what about Cedric Diggory? He's the reserve seeker."

"He is." Pomona acknowledged Harry's comment about Cedric. "But since we have no-one else, we need Cedric to remain as the reserve for the chasers." When Pomona had told Cedric what she

was going to do, he had been a little disappointed not to be offered the seeker's position but he was also aware that Harry appeared to be a better seeker than he was, and he had been promised a shot at the seeker's position when the new school year began.

"And Greg Summerby?" Harry again reminded Pomona of the current seeker.

"Gregory will remain on the team as Captain and reserve seeker." Because of the injuries he had sustained to his back in his last match, Greg Summerby was glad to shed the full-time seeker position, and he had quickly agreed to stand down, especially when Pomona had asked him to remain as Captain.

Harry, however, continued to argue. "But I can't just take his place."

Greg, who as Captain had accompanied Pomona to speak to Harry, placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Yes, you can. You're good, Harry, really good. And I want you on the team."

"But, but, but..." Harry was now lost for words, and he blurted out the first thing that came into his head. "But I don't know what to do."

"First of all, I think you should send Malfoy a thank you card." George laughed nastily, the volume of his voice growing louder when he spotted several first year Slytherins going by.

Fred's face was a mirror of his twin's as was the volume of his voice. "Yeah. Cause if it wasn't for Malfoy, this would never have happened." He turned to face Pomona Sprout, and his voice became more respectful. "Professor, when was the last time a first year made a house team?"

Pomona had to own up to her ignorance. "I'm afraid I don't know."

"I do," Hermione piped up, having researched quidditch since she had developed a crush on George so that she could join in with conversations about the game. "It was more than a century ago."

"Hear that, Harry?" Fred nudged the dark-haired boy. "So now you're not only famous for beating You-Know-Who but..."

George butted in and finished Fred's sentence. "... you're also going to be famous for being the only first year to make a house team in over a hundred years."

"And won't it just go to his already swollen head?" Looming over the crowd, Snape's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Now I think this little party should be disbanded. Potter should be applying himself to his schoolwork, not pandering to his fan club."

Not one to usually rock the boat, Pomona turned a disgruntled eye on Severus and defended one of her favorite students. "Harry applies himself well as he's just proven today!" Having made her point, Pomona then turned her back on her colleague, and she smiled brightly at the small crowd. "But perhaps it is time to let Harry catch his breath, and maybe we should head towards the hospital wing so that we can have that leg taken care of."

Having been slighted by his colleague, Severus walked off in disgust, heading back towards the school. Most of the crowd then began to follow him, not because of Severus' high-handed demand, but because a teacher they all liked had pointed out that Harry needed medical attention.

As he limped towards the castle, Justin supporting him on his injured side, Harry questioned his teacher about her decision. "Do you really want me to play seeker for Hufflepuff, Professor?"

"Don't you want to represent your house team, Harry?" Pomona asked gently, thinking that Harry was just being modest.

"Um, yeah." Under the circumstances, Harry did not know what else to say.

Greg did. "In that case, practice is at six o'clock on Tuesday. Do you have your own broom?"

"No." Harry had never imagined he would need one, to say nothing of the rules preventing a first year from bringing a broomstick to school.

"In that case, I'll look through the school brooms to try and find you a decent one," Greg informed him, before going further. "And one more thing, just so you know, all positions are granted on a year by

year basis, so you'll have to try out again at the start of your second year. But in the meantime, welcome to the team, Harry."

"Thanks." Still desirous of merging into the background, Harry decided that he would not try out next year, but at that moment, he had little other choice except to accept the position. Having reached the door to the school, Harry shook hands with Greg, who then departed. And after noticing Roger Banks, the second year who had loaned the broomstick Harry had used, standing behind him, Harry also thanked him. "Thank you for letting me use your broom."

"Anytime." Roger walked off, reverently cradling the broomstick that had been recovered by one of the Hufflepuff beaters before it could fly into the Whomping Willow, a particularly malevolent tree that sat close to the quidditch pitch.

"You do know that he'll probably never clean that broom again, don't you?" Susan teased Harry as they headed up the stairs and onto the first floor. "It'll be the broom that helped the Boy Who Lived become the youngest seeker in a century."

"Just great!" Harry was no more enamored of knowing that than he was of becoming Hufflepuff's seeker. When they finally reached the hospital wing, Harry could not help but feel relieved. The pain in his leg had been worsening with every step he took. "Thank goodness we're here."

On spotting Madam Pomfrey bearing down on them, Justin quickly rounded up the group that had accompanied Harry. "We'd better go."

As the group hurried out, Harry called out to his friends. "See you later." He then gratefully consigned himself to Madam Pomfrey's care.

Next Chapter: Neville encounters an unusual mirror; Harry meets up with a friend in Diagon Alley; A dragon egg goes missing.

Note: Not too many changes this time. Next chapter will be up Monday or Tuesday as I'm busy this weekend.

Chapter 9: Of Dogs and Dragons

Apart from Draco's housemates turning his hair black and yellow for a few days as a punishment for losing to Harry, things soon settled down after the excitement surrounding Harry's initial induction into the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. For Harry, the only difference in his life was the fact that he now had to juggle schoolwork and quidditch practice, which took place three times a week. Harry was therefore grateful for Hermione's help in looking over whatever homework he had done, the pair usually meeting in the library for an hour after dinner. And it was in the library, almost two weeks after Harry's victory over Draco, where Ron and Neville sat watching Harry and Hermione going over their defense homework together, Harry still wearing his quidditch garb as he had come straight from practice.

Neville scowled at the sight. "It isn't fair. Just because he managed to catch some little balls with wings, he gets to be in his house team, and I've heard that he'll be allowed to bring a broom to school if he wants to. If he can, then we all should be able to do the same."

Ron was unable to understand why Neville was so upset about the broomstick waiver, especially since Neville's own flying skills left a lot to be desired, but being a loyal friend Ron said nothing about it. "At least he beat Malfoy."

"Probably set the whole thing up with him." Neville's voice was full of bitterness.

"I don't think so." Ron defended Harry, not because he liked him but because he hated Draco. "You saw how angry Malfoy was when he stormed past us."

"I suppose." Neville was not eager to relinquish the idea that Harry had done something underhand, but if he did not want to get into trouble the next day, Neville knew he had focus on finishing the essay he had only partially written for Potions rather than bitching about Harry. "I guess we should start on our homework." Grumbling and tugging out his parchment, Ron agreed, and Neville began to search through his book bag for his own essay, only to come up empty-handed. "Shite! I left it in the dormitory. I'll be back shortly."

Leaving Ron behind to work on his barely started essay, Neville set off for Gryffindor tower, tossing his remembrall up and down in his

hand. "Stupid thing. Doesn't even work." As he threw it higher into the air, a glint of gold from a slightly open door caught his eye, and, distracted, Neville almost dropped the remembrall before safely catching it and placing it in his pocket. About to continue walking by, Neville suddenly changed his mind, and he decided to find out what had caught his attention. After looking up and down the corridor and spotting no-one, Neville pushed open the door to the room that the glint had come from, and he stepped inside.

What he found was not particularly exciting. The only thing inside of the room, situated in the very center of it, was a large ornate mirror that stood on clawed feet. Disappointed, Neville decided to leave but instead he found himself walking towards the mirror. And on getting closer, Neville could see writing around the frame. His curiosity aroused again, Neville walked right up to the mirror, and he read aloud the words that surrounded the mirror's glass interior. "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi."

Neville's voice echoed around the room making him start at the astoundingly loud sound. And it was at that moment that Neville caught sight of his reflection in the mirror, forcing an involuntary expletive from his lips. "Merlin!"

His heart pounding in his chest, Neville reached out to touch the image that had caused his outburst. His movement was somewhat hesitant, almost as if the mirror would not feel as he expected. But it did, cold and unyielding under his fingers, and he spoke almost unthinkingly to himself as his fingers brushed against the hard glass. "How can I be seeing this?"

As he finished speaking, a scraping sound reached Neville's ears and he jumped nervously again, his hand falling away from the mirror. However, when he looked around to see who or what had made the noise, he discovered that there was no-one to be seen. Deciding he was imagining things, Neville returned his attention back to the mirror, and he scratched his head as he tried to figure out what it was he was seeing. When he was unable to work it out, Neville spoke cautiously to the image in the mirror. "I know you aren't really me." Saying nothing, Neville's doppelganger merely stared back at him, a lightning bolt scar evident on his forehead.

As Neville continued to stare, he gasped out loud when he saw his parents and grandmother walk into view inside the mirror. After

reflexively glancing behind him and finding no-one, Neville did not understand how they could be reflected in the glass. Then again, he was unable to understand how he could be seeing himself with Harry's famous scar. But Neville's ponderings came to an end and his chest started to tighten, when his family in the mirror began smiling at his doppelganger, his grandmother beaming widely at the boy who was not really him. And the constriction only worsened when his grandmother drew the fake Neville into her arms, a proud look adorning her face. It was not fair! Neville had wanted to be treated like that all of his life. And now it seemed as though the imposter inside the mirror knew this, and that he was tormenting Neville with what he wanted, but could never have.

Tearing his gaze away from the images in the mirror, Neville re-read the words surrounding the glass of the mirror. It clicked then what the writing was; it was mirror writing. Neville therefore hoped that if he began to read from the end of the phrase rather than from the beginning, he might be able to make sense of the garbled words and the confusing images that he was seeing. So he again spoke aloud as he reversed the order of the words, and this time the words formed a comprehensible statement. "I show not your face but your heart's desire."

Armed with this new information, Neville finally understood what he was witnessing, and he could not deny that the mirror was right about what he desired. He wanted to have his parents whole and for his grandmother to be proud of him, but most of all he wanted to be like Harry. Aware that none of this would probably ever happen, and about to burst into tears, Neville fled the room, slamming the door shut behind him as he did so. It was to be more than a month later before the mirror would be visited again.

The day after Neville's adventure, instead of heading for the library, Harry headed off to see Minerva for their usual Wednesday evening get together. They spent a pleasant time together until Harry put down his empty mug that bore his name, and which had been full of hot chocolate until Harry had drunk every last drop of it. "Before I go, I meant to ask you a question about Christmas."

Minerva had already told Harry that she would be staying at Hogwarts, meaning that Harry would also be spending his vacation at the school. "What is it?"

Harry, however, did not have a question about his living situation. "Is there any way I can get Christmas presents without leaving the school?"

Minerva nodded. "There's owl post, or Hagrid is going to Diagon Alley on Saturday for me. I could..." She suddenly stopped speaking, an idea forming in her mind. "Or, as you don't have lessons that day and it's almost Christmas, I don't see why you couldn't go with him as a special treat. If there's anything you don't manage to get then, I can take you shopping after school breaks up. But if you have homework, then you'll have to wait until I take you or order your gifts from a catalogue."

Harry had no intention of using a catalogue if he could go shopping in the exciting environs of Diagon Alley. "I'd much rather go to Diagon Alley with you or Hagrid."

Normally Minerva would never have sanctioned such a trip during term time. But, after finding out that Harry had never experienced a proper Christmas celebration, nor indeed bought or received gifts, she was willing to be a little more lenient than usual, hence her bending the rules. "Then I'll ask Hagrid if he doesn't mind you accompanying him. But don't forget about your homework."

Excited, Harry was very fervent in his response. "I'll make sure I get everything done before Saturday, Aunt Minnie." Harry's homework assignments had begun to dwindle with most of the teachers not wanting to have to read through pupils' work with Christmas almost upon them. Only Severus Snape continued to ply work upon them unrelentingly, and Harry had already made arrangements to complete his Potions assignment with Hermione on Sunday.

"Good but I'll still have to clear it with the Headmaster, so don't count your chickens until I've spoken to him," Minerva warned, even though she was almost one hundred per cent positive that Albus would say yes.

"I won't," Harry promised. He then bid his guardian goodnight and hurried out to head back towards his house.

Harry's chicken counting was soon over, and less than a week later, Harry found himself standing in Gringotts, his face alight with joy as

he climbed out of the cart that had just taken him down to his vault and back to the surface again. "That was brilliant, Hagrid. Don't you just love the way the cart rocks when it goes around the bends?"

At the memory, Hagrid clamped a large hand over his mouth, his stomach threatening to rebel. When his stomach finally calmed down, Hagrid felt safe enough to remove his hand and he managed to answer Harry. "Not so much."

"I bet you liked the dragon then." This time when he had ridden in the wobbly cart, Harry's attention had not been focused elsewhere, and he had seen a glimpse of a wing and a stream of flames from deep inside the tunnels.

Now Hagrid's face softened. "If only I could get a dragon like that, everything would be jus' perfect. It could live with me in meh hut."

"Hagrid, your hut is wooden," Harry pointed out.

As Hagrid responded to Harry's comment, a blonde girl shot forward. "Harry!"

Harry did not answer Hagrid's comeback, his attention now on the blonde girl standing in front of him. "Luna, what are you doing here?"

"Shopping with Daddy." Luna turned as a very strange looking man joined them, and Luna slipped her hand into his. "Daddy, this is Harry Potter. Harry, this is my father, Xenophilius Lovegood."

Harry refrained from staring at the man who looked like a cross between a character he had seen in a movie about a gull-winged sports car and time travel, and an aging hippie. "Hello."

"Hello." Xenophilius returned the greeting. "What are you doing here?"

"Shopping." Harry wanted to back away, a little unnerved by the fact that one of Xenophilius' eyes was obviously not quite normal, the eye in question pointing inwards towards his nose. "You?"

"Shopping with my angel." Xenophilius smiled down at Luna, who returned the gentle look.

Hagrid, however, knew Xenophilius from Hogwarts, and he held out his hand to greet him. "Phil, nice to see yeh."

The two men then got into a conversation together, leaving Harry and Luna with an opportunity to converse without the adults listening in on their conversation. "Have you just come up from the vaults?"

"No." Luna shook her head. "We're about to go down and make a withdrawal."

"I've just been to mine." Harry's voice was full of excitement as he revealed what he had witnessed this time. "And I saw a dragon on the way back up."

"I love dragons." Just like Hagrid, Luna became dreamy as she thought about the winged beasts. "I'd like to own one."

Harry wondered if the entire wizarding world was mad about dragons, or whether it was just Hagrid and Luna. "So would Hagrid. He had said he would like one but he's planning to keep it in his wooden hut!" As Harry revealed Hagrid's desire to own a dragon, neither he nor Luna spotted a man waiting at a counter behind them, a man that had begun to pay attention to their conversation.

Having no idea that she was being eavesdropped upon, Luna shot down Hagrid's idea. "That's mad. His hut would burn down."

"That's what I tried to tell him just now but he said that he could always build a new one." Harry then recalled something Hermione had mentioned when she had been reading through an advanced book on defense while she waited for Harry to finish his homework, and he hoped that it was right. "Isn't it illegal to own dragons, anyway?"

"Yes." Luna confirmed Harry's answer. "But from what Daddy has said, I don't think that would bother Hagrid." Luna's father had told her all about Hagrid when she had mentioned that Harry was now friends with the large groundskeeper.

Harry found himself wondering whether he would walk into Hagrid's hut one day and either up being eaten or set on fire by a dragon the big man had hidden in there. "Let's just hope he doesn't ever get his hands on one."

"I don't think he can." Luna had no idea though about what Hagrid might be allowed to do at Hogwarts. "I know that most dragons live in places like Romania or the Rocky Mountains in America." She frowned as she tried to recall what else she had read in a book her father had given her about exotic animals. "Oh yes, and you need lots of space to keep a dragon. How big is Hagrid's hut?"

"It's not very big, and he only has one room." Harry had no real idea how big a dragon could get or how much space it needed. "How much space do you need?"

"I can't really remember," Luna admitted, even though she knew she had read about it. "But I do know that it's a lot." Wanting to ask about a very different but still dangerous animal, Luna pulled Harry to one side, even further away from their guardians but closer to the man at the counter. "Have you been back to see the dog?"

"No way." Harry violently shook his head, almost unable to believe that Luna would have even let the thought cross her mind, let alone expected him to have done something that stupid. "That thing has three chances to bite, and I'm not going to give it one."

"But you said it went to sleep when you started singing," Luna remarked, her voice a little wistful. "It might let you pet it then."

As Luna finished her first sentence, neither child took any notice of the sharp intake of breath that came from the man who was still listening in on their conversation. And they therefore continued to chat about the dog, Harry wearing a stunned look at Luna's second comment. "You can't be serious. I'm never going anywhere near it ever again."

"But if you don't go back, you won't find out what the dog is guarding," Luna protested, Harry having filled her in on what he believed the dog was doing in the school.

Harry gaped at his friend. "I don't want to know what it's guarding."

"You really don't want to know?" Luna asked, a little disappointed at Harry's lack of enthusiasm about the mystery.

"No!" Harry's voice was resolute. "I have enough on my plate already."

"I'd have liked to see it." Luna's voice regained its wistful air, and her eyes sparkled as she thought of something. "I bet the dog would be nice to you if Hagrid introduced you to it."

"I don't want to be introduced to it. I've already met it." Harry decided that Luna was a little too crazy about animals, and told her so. "You and Hagrid would get along well. You both like scary animals."

"Most animals are only scary because you don't know how to treat them." Luna was a little like Hagrid in her belief that most animals were unfairly maligned. "Or you're frightened of them. And I bet that Hagrid isn't scared of that dog."

"It's his dog so he shouldn't be." Harry then revealed what he considered the most disturbing part about the Cerberus. "And he calls it Fluffy!"

"That's really sweet." Luna was enchanted by the name, and she decided that Harry was overreacting. "So perhaps Fluffy's not as bad as you said after all."

"Believe me, you wouldn't want to be in the same room as that thing when it's awake." Harry shivered at the memory. "Its teeth were bigger than my fingers." Harry was exaggerating a little but the experience had not been a fun one for him.

With the two adults picking that moment to rejoin them, Luna had little chance to say much more to Harry. Instead she decided to ask Hagrid directly about the Cerberus and its mission. "Mr. Hagrid, what is Fluffy guarding?"

Harry winced at Luna's bluntness but it had the desired effect with Hagrid going red and warning Luna off. "That's between Professor Dumbledore and Mr. Flamel." Hagrid's mouth was then treated to another hand clamping when Hagrid realized that he had maybe said a little too much. "Jus' forget about Fluffy. Both of yeh." He then turned to Harry. "Time to be gettin' on, Harry. We've things ter do."

Even though he had continually told himself that he did not care about Fluffy, Harry filed the information about 'Mr. Flamel' away. "I'd better be off then."

"I'll write to you about what dragons need." Luna decided to look through her book when she got home. Also it would give her an excuse to try and pester Harry about finding out about Mr. Flamel and maybe visiting Fluffy again.

"Thanks." Harry was not really that interested in dragons, but not wanting to hurt his friend's feelings, he smiled politely. When Hagrid looked pointedly at the door, Harry went to follow him, only to stop as he remembered the reason why he was in Diagon in the first place. "I'll be sending your Christmas present with Hedwig."

Luna had already sorted Harry's present out weeks earlier. "I'll get Daddy to shrink yours, and Hedwig can take it back with her." Then quite unabashedly, Luna stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Harry's waist. "Have a Merry Christmas, Harry."

This time Harry knew what to do, and instead of stiffening up, he relaxed into the embrace, wrapping his arms around Luna, and returning the gentle hug. "You too, Luna."

After they separated, Luna headed off towards the vaults with her father, and Harry went with Hagrid onto the main thoroughfare of Diagon Alley to begin his Christmas shopping.

Harry's excitement about Christmas was about to have a damper placed on it when, just before the Hogwarts Express was due to leave, Fred collared him. "Harry, we won't be here over Christmas."

"Why not?" Harry was aware that the Weasley parents and Fred's little sister were supposed to be visiting Fred's brother, meaning that the remaining Weasley siblings would have to stay on at Hogwarts. Only now that did not seem as if it was going to happen.

"My brother..." Fred did not get a chance to say anything else as George came dashing out.

"Come on, Fred." George grabbed Fred by his overly long scarf that their mother had knitted and dragged him out of the front door. "We're going to miss the train. He'll write, Harry."

As the twins dashed for the train, George questioned Fred. "What were you doing?"

"I was trying to tell Harry about why we'd suddenly changed our plans." The twins' stay at Hogwarts had been changed only hours before the Express was due to leave.

The twins' mother, Molly, had sent an owl to the school to say that a dragon had injured their brother Charlie, who worked on a dragon reserve in Romania. Her missive had explained that someone had stolen an egg and the egg's mother had been extremely unhappy about it, Charlie receiving the brunt of her anger, resulting in his healer ordering him home to recuperate. And Molly had therefore declared that she wanted all of her sons to come home from Hogwarts to spend Christmas back at the Burrow, the Weasley family home. So the twins, Ron, and Percy had all hurriedly packed, said their goodbyes, and joined the majority of their school friends who were returning home.

"You can write and tell Harry." George repeated what he had already said to Harry, his breathing now heavy after the mad dash to the train station. "And we can also send him his Christmas present at the same time."

"I suppose. I was looking forward to seeing his face when he saw what we'd gotten him." Fred's voice reflected his disappointment.

Running onto the platform, George spotted Lee holding open a bright red door and gesturing wildly to the two boys. "Look, it's Lee. Ron or Percy must have told him."

Cheering up at the sight of their best friend, Fred yelled out to him as the two boys hurried to board the train. "Thanks, Lee. If we'd missed this, Mum would have gone mad."

"Yeah." George shoved his brother inside just as the whistle blew. "Do you think she's baked?"

"Stupid question, George. Mum will have baked enough to feed an army," Fred retorted, and the conversation turned to food as all three boys dropped onto their seats, all thoughts of Harry and Hogwarts pushed aside.

Back at Hogwarts, Harry was left standing alone, the mystery of why the Weasleys were no longer staying over for Christmas going unsolved. Aware that standing in the draughty doorway was not going to provide him with any answers, Harry despondently made his way back to his common room. He would have been a lot happier if he had known what was going to happen to him a few days later.

Next Chapter: Harry experiences a Christmas to remember.

Note: I've chopped some bits out, and made some grammatical changes.

Chapter 10: A Christmas Armistice

Harry had just picked up a pretty silver and red knitted scarf when a pair of voices interrupted him, and he span around. "Fred! George!"

"That's so your color, Harry," Fred teased, spotting the scarf dangling between Harry's fingers.

"Going to wear it on Christmas Day, Harry?" George joined in with his brother's teasing.

"No." Harry reddened. "I was thinking of buying it for Susan for Christmas."

"Little Harry has a girlfriend." Fred thought it was hilarious to see how uncomfortable he was making Harry.

"You know very well that Susan's just a friend," Harry protested. "And I'm not just buying her something." At this point, Harry held up his other hand to reveal a silver bracelet that had little dragon charms attached to it. "I'm also going to buy this for Luna." Harry had failed to find anything when he had gone around the stores with Hagrid, and he had also felt a little uncomfortable with the larger man watching his every move.

Fred sniggered. "So you've got two girlfriends then."

"No." Harry was getting annoyed with the teasing, and he was about to walk off.

Noticing Harry's movement, George nudged his brother. "Let's leave him alone now."

Fred was about to say something about it being fun when he spotted their mother bearing down upon them. "Look out. Mum's coming."

"Fred, George, I'd rather you didn't wander off." The woman glanced at Harry, immediately presuming him to be a friend of her sons. "Hello, dear."

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley," Harry responded politely, aware from Fred's comment exactly who the short, red-headed woman was.

Molly Weasley was pleased by Harry's manners, and she therefore apologized for what she was about to do. "I'm sorry, dear, but Fred and George have to be off now." She then started to shepherd her sons away from Harry.

Fred realized that his mother had no idea who she was talking to. So far Harry had managed to hide from any photographers that had tried to take his picture, leaving the general public, including Molly Weasley, completely unaware of what he currently looked like. "Um, Mum, this is Harry Potter."

It was not exactly surprising that Molly had failed to immediately recognize Harry since Harry's usual marked resemblance to his father was not so evident at that moment. His hair was currently hidden by a woolly hat, and he was also wearing the new contacts that Minerva had taken him to get fitted with first thing that morning so that he would have less trouble seeing when playing quidditch in the rain. Harry had already decided that he preferred the contacts to his usual glasses and that he would be wearing them all the time and not just for quidditch.

On learning who Harry was, Molly immediately turned back around, and her face became a picture of both sadness and pleasure. "Do you know that I haven't seen you since you were a baby?" Not giving Harry a chance to respond, she went on. "But I should have guessed who you were. You look a little like your dad, and you have your mum's eyes."

"You knew my parents?" Harry, as usual, was eager to talk to anyone who had known his parents.

"I met them a few times." Molly did not go into detail, and she abruptly changed the subject, her tone becoming a little worried and bossy. "Now what are you doing out here alone?"

"He's not alone, Molly," a female voice interrupted. "I accompanied Harry here."

"Minerva, it's lovely to see you." Molly greeted her former teacher. "Are you chaperoning Harry in place of his relatives so that he can buy Christmas gifts for them?" From the twins' letters, Molly was aware that Harry had gone to live with Lily's sister as a baby but she knew little more than that.

Minerva had no chance to respond as Fred jumped back into the conversation. "Nah. He's staying at Hogwarts because his relatives don't want him home."

Molly's facial expression changed to one of horror. "They don't want him home at Christmas?"

"Nope." George backed up what his brother had said before asking his mother a question. "So can Harry come home with us, Mum? It's going to be boring at Hogwarts for him."

Harry blushed under all of the attention. "I like it at Hogwarts."

"Yeah, Mum." Fred ignored Harry's protest and repeated George's question. "Can Harry come back with us?"

George made an addition to his original plea. "Yeah, Mum, can he? He's far too thin and needs feeding up."

Molly was well-known for her love of food and for forcing it upon those she believed needed it. She clucked sympathetically as she scanned Harry, taking in his tiny frame, and judging him in need of the feeding up her son had claimed. "If it's okay with Minerva, then yes, Harry can come back with us."

Minerva wholeheartedly trusted the compassionate woman. And, since finding out about Harry's true home life situation, she knew that before he had asked Minerva to become Harry's guardian, Albus had first debated in reassigning Harry's care to Molly. "He may, but someone will need to bring him back to Hogwarts when he wants to return. I'm on duty over the Christmas period."

George and Fred exchanged delighted glances, and both chorused together, "He can come back with us on the Express."

"I can't stay that long," Harry hurriedly spat out, not wanting the twins to impose his company upon their family without their mother's say-so.

"If Harry decides he wants to return before the Express is due to leave, I'll ask Arthur to return him to school," Molly promised. "Otherwise he can return with the twins."

Harry felt a little overwhelmed by events, and as usual, he found an excuse as to why he was unable to do something. "But I haven't got any clothes with me."

"I'll arrange for something to be delivered to you with Hedwig," Minerva promised. She had hoped to spend Christmas morning with Harry but on reflection she decided that the young boy would have far more fun at the Weasleys. He would also have the opportunity to witness what a real family Christmas should be like. "Have you finished shopping yet?"

"No, Professor. And I need to pay for these before I get what else I need." Harry went red again when everyone stared at the gifts. "I'll go and pay for them now."

With Fred and George in tow, Harry hurriedly disappeared towards the till, leaving Molly and Minerva to chat. "How long will you be here?"

"I'm going to take Harry for some lunch after we finish shopping." Minerva had already planned to take him to a little restaurant that sold her favorite meal, Cullen skink, a soup containing potatoes, cream, and smoked haddock. And she was intending to introduce Harry to a Forfar bridie, ground beef and onions wrapped in a light pastry, since just like Molly, she felt that Harry needed feeding up. "So how about we say that we meet up at the Leaky Cauldron at about three?"

"That works well for us," Molly assured Minerva after thinking through what she still needed to do in her head.

The two groups split up when the three boys returned.

Before Harry knew where the time had gone, he found himself standing in the Leaky Cauldron, his face pale as he watched Fred vanish in a flash of green flames.

Harry had never used floo powder before, Minerva choosing to travel via the Knight Bus with Harry, and he was now more than a little alarmed by the mode of transport he was being expected to use. "Mrs. Weasley, doesn't it burn?"

"No, dear." Molly put an arm around Harry. "Now just grab a handful of the floo power as Fred did, step into the fireplace, throw down the powder, and say 'The Burrow'."

Harry did as Molly told him and his world quickly became a disorientating, green and black spinning nightmare. By the time his vision had finally cleared, he had been spat out at the other end, landing with a thump on the floor. When he looked up from his knees, he found Fred grinning down at him. "That was horrible."

"You get used to it." Fred grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him to his feet. "Welcome to the Burrow."

Looking around the room he had just fallen into, Harry's mouth fell open in surprise. He had never seen a house quite like it. A rocking chair was moving on its own, a broom was dancing around the floor sweeping up mini fluff bunnies, and, most intriguing of all, a clock stood in the corner that had situations labeled around its face and not numbers. "Wow!"

"So what do you think?" George had joined them by then.

"It's amazing." Harry did not look at George when he answered. He was still taking it all in, his eyes finding something new in every corner.

The twins were pleased that Harry liked their home and chorused together, "Great!"

A small red-headed girl came running into the room. "Where's Mum?"

"I'm here, Ginny dear." Molly stepped out of the floo just in time to catch the girl's question. "Has Charlie been taking good care of you?"

"Mum, I can look after myself," Ginny protested, before asking a question. "Do we have any chocolate biscuits? Charlie wants some with a cup of tea."

"Left-hand cupboard over the sink." Molly directed her towards the culinary delights. "But before you dash off, I have someone I want you to meet."

Ginny had spotted the boy in the woolly hat, and she sighed heavily. Even though she was only ten, her mother was not above future matchmaking. "Okay."

Harry took over from Molly, and he politely pulled off his hat and offered his hand to Ginny. "Hello, I'm Harry Potter."

Her resigned demeanor vanishing, Ginny was totally taken aback to finally meet the one boy she had ever shown any interest in. And George and Fred knew it. Ever since she was old enough to understand, Ginny had been obsessed with hearing about the baby who had defeated Voldemort. The twins therefore had to leave the room and go into the kitchen, their fists stuffed into their mouths so that their mother would not hear them, as they laughed at Ginny's deer in the headlights expression. Completely mesmerized by Harry, Ginny barely noticed them go, and confused words tumbled out of her mouth in reaction to Harry's greeting. "H...Hello, Ginny, I'm Harry."

Ginny's nervous response to Harry was too much for George and Fred, who could still hear what was being said, and twin explosions of laughter reached the ears of the occupiers of the sitting room, driving Molly to head into the kitchen to berate the boys. Harry, however, took pity on the young girl, and he ignored her faux pas. "Hi Ginny. I'm a friend of the twins."

Still nervous, Ginny nodded, her mouth dry. "Yes."

Realizing that the young girl in front of him was horribly nervous, Harry tried to think of something to say to relax her. "Are you looking forward to coming to Hogwarts?"

His efforts received yet another monosyllabic answer. "Yes."

"Hello." A stocky red-headed man came limping into the room. He was completely oblivious to the drama playing out, his focus elsewhere as he interrupted the stilted conversation. "Where are my tea and biscuits, Gin?"

The words 'Harry Potter' were all Ginny could manage before fleeing.

The new arrival understood his sister's predicament, and he took little notice of her departure. Instead he offered his large and calloused hand to Harry. "Charlie Weasley." Unlike Ginny, Charlie was not the slightest bit put out by who Harry was, and he proceeded to tease the boy. "I never expected to meet the great Harry Potter, especially not in my dining room, and most definitely not chatting up my sister."

"I'm not chatting up your sister." Harry was horrified that Charlie would think that. He was also more than a little peeved that Charlie was obviously one of those people who thought that Harry had done something wonderful, and Harry's tacked-on rejoinder was more than a little defensive. "And I've done nothing special, and I'm not great."

Charlie recognized that he had upset Harry, and he immediately owned up to his intent. "I was just teasing you, Harry, on both counts." Charlie wrapped his fingers around Harry's hand as it was finally placed into his. "And it's nice to meet you."

Harry resisted the temptation to shake out his fingers when Charlie finally released his hand, since Charlie's grip had been firm and more than a little rough. "You too."

"So what brings you here?" Charlie led Harry to the sofa to sit down, and then he yelled out before Harry could respond. "Gin, get the biscuits and a cup of a tea for Harry."

At Charlie's casual attitude, Harry became aware that, as he had claimed, Charlie had indeed simply been teasing him about both his sister and Harry's greatness. "I bumped into the twins in Diagon Alley, and one thing led to another and your mum said I could stay over Christmas."

"I expect she'll shove you in with Ron, who was supposed to be sharing with Percy." Charlie seemed unperturbed that Harry was going to be invading his family's home at Christmas, and he merely nodded towards the stairs, indicating that Ron, or at least his room, was up there. "I suppose Percy will end up back in his room with Bill and me."

"Won't that make things a little crowded?" Harry became concerned that he was going to cause a squeeze in the Weasley household. "And what about the twins?"

"Bill is arriving on Christmas Eve and leaving on Boxing Day, so it won't be too bad," Charlie informed Harry. "And the twins have their own room but no-one in their right mind would want to share with them."

Harry would have; he was not too pleased to hear that he would likely have to share with Ron, but politely he said nothing. "Don't you live here all the time then?"

Charlie took the mugs of tea and plate of biscuits from a blushing Ginny, who fled again, before shaking his head. "I usually live in Romania."

Harry realized then that this was the brother that the Weasley parents should have been going out to visit. Because George and Fred had not gotten around to writing to him, Harry was still in the dark as to why Charlie had come home instead. But before he got a chance to ask, Charlie obligingly continued talking, filling Harry in. "Mum, Dad, and Ginny were supposed to be coming to stay with me for Christmas but I injured myself when a mother got free after someone stole one of her eggs. I got in the way of her rampage and got trampled. So instead of my family coming over to Romania, the healers ordered me home to recuperate."

Harry had no idea that Charlie worked with dragons. Fred and George had only said in passing that both of their eldest brothers had very different jobs, but typically for them, neither had said what either sibling did. "Babies?"

Charlie quickly comprehended from the young boy's puzzled look that Harry probably had no idea what he did as a profession. "I'm a dragon handler. At the moment I'm still training though."

Now Harry understood what Charlie meant about the babies, and how he could have possibly gotten trampled by a mother. "Isn't that a dangerous job?"

Charlie had to admit that it was. "Yes it is but it's worth it. I absolutely love working with dragons."

Harry wondered how you knew that you loved dragons enough to work with them, and he asked Charlie exactly that. Charlie smiled as he recalled what had set him on his career path. "I first came into contact with wild animals when I met Hagrid. A baby wolf he was nursing back to health in his hut got out, and I came across it. I don't know who was more frightened, me or the wolf. Anyway, Hagrid found both of us before things turned ugly, and he began to introduce me to more and more animals when I professed to being an animal lover. And at my career session before I left school, my current position was suggested, and the rest as they say is history."

At the mention of Hagrid, Harry recalled the conversation he had shared with the large man. "Hagrid said he would love to have a dragon."

Charlie was not surprised to hear this. "Hagrid's wanted a dragon for as long as I can remember. I keep expecting him to turn up where I work."

Harry laughed at the look on Charlie's face, deciding he liked this Weasley as much as he liked the twins. "You had better lock your dragons up then."

In return, Charlie decided that he liked Harry, and that the dark-haired boy was not at all what he had expected. "I'd probably do better locking up Hagrid." Wanting to know more about the boy who was sitting in front of him, Charlie changed the subject to focus on Harry, who was still laughing. "George told me that you've just made seeker for Hufflepuff."

All at once Harry's laughter died. "Yeah but I didn't want the position."

"So why did you take it?"

Harry shrugged, and he explained what had happened. "... and so I couldn't say no, and there was no-one else to really take the spot if I did. Well, Cedric Diggory could have but that would have left the team without a reserve chaser or reserve seeker."

"And you couldn't allow that to happen." Charlie knew only too well how injuries and a lack of decent players could affect a team's

chances. "I don't know if the twins told you but I played seeker for Gryffindor."

"Did you like it?"

Charlie's face became alight with joy. "I loved it. If the weather was better, and I wasn't injured, I'd have taken you outside for a little practice." His enthusiasm died down when he remembered what Harry had said. "But seeing as you don't really like flying or quidditch, then perhaps it's a good thing we can't go out."

From the way Charlie's face had lit up, Harry had guessed that the young man had enjoyed playing, and he did not want his newfound friend to get the wrong idea about Harry's own feelings. "Actually I really love flying." Harry had no clue that his own face now looked a little like Charlie's as he thought about flying. It changed though when he thought about the crowds that had witnessed his victory over Draco. "But I don't like people staring at me."

"I'm afraid that comes with the territory." Charlie broke off from what he was saying to crane his head behind him when he heard footsteps. And spotting his younger brother, he filled him in on the situation. "Ron, I think you're going to be having a different roommate for a few days."

Ron's face did not reveal his shock at seeing Harry Potter sitting chatting with his brother in the middle of their sitting room. "Right." He then turned around and walked away.

"I take it that you and Ron don't get along?" Charlie had not missed the fact that the two boys had said nothing to each other, not even providing a polite smile.

"Not really," Harry admitted, and suddenly feeling uncomfortable, he got to his feet. "Perhaps I'd better ask your mum if I can go back to Hogwarts. I don't want to make things awkward."

"Don't be daft." Charlie waved off Harry's fears. "Ron will behave as long as you do."

Harry had no intention of being misbehaving when he was a guest in someone else's house. "I won't do anything wrong."

Charlie smiled at Harry's concerned expression. "I didn't think you would. Now sit back down, and we'll have a little talk about quidditch, and we'll see if I can't get you a little more fired up about the game."

Harry did not think Charlie would succeed but he did not want to offend him, and so he sat back down. "Okay then."

Charlie began. "I want to tell you about a move called the 'Wronski Feint'..."

After that first afternoon, Harry's time at the Weasleys fell into a set pattern. During the day, he would spend it talking to Charlie about quidditch and dragons or with the twins up in their room. Then at night, Mr. Weasley would quiz him during and after dinner about everything Muggle, something Harry found both exasperating and fun at the same time.

And it had not been as bad as he had thought it would be sharing a room with Ron. The two boys said nothing to each other outside of the bedroom resorting to polite comments or nods, mostly for Molly's sake. And they shared even less dialogue inside the bedroom since Ron usually went to bed first and pretended to be asleep when Harry joined him, and Harry would get up long before Ron was even awake.

This unspoken armistice continued until Christmas morning, when Harry opened his eyes to find that Ron's bed was empty. After getting washed and returning to the bedroom to get dressed, Harry headed down into the sitting room to find the Weasley clan were all still pajama clad, small piles of ripped Christmas paper sitting beside each member. However, he was unable to see Ron, but a small pile of paper without an owner told him that Ron had definitely been there. "Good morning."

"Morning, Harry." Molly hurried over and put her arm around Harry, leading him to sit next to Ginny, and placing him right next to the ownerless pile of wrapping paper. "And Merry Christmas." Molly handed over the Christmas present that she had picked up when Harry had appeared.

Harry's mouth dropped to his chin in surprise. "You got me a Christmas present?"

Molly ignored Harry's bad grammar. "Of course, dear. You didn't think we'd leave you out, did you? And just so that you know, we do the main Christmas present opening after dinner but we always open one present before breakfast." When Harry made no move to open his gift, Molly gently chided him. "Come on, Harry, open it up."

Harry's fingers trembled as he opened the brown wrapping paper that covered his gift. Pulling the ends of the paper apart, he found a homemade scarf in his house colors. Soon though, it disappeared in a blur of tears. Not wanting anyone to see him like this, Harry dropped the paper to the ground, and, with the scarf in his hands, he ran back up to the room he was sharing with Ron. As he flung himself on the camp bed that Molly had set up for him, he tried hard to regain control of his emotions, and he hoped that the Weasleys would leave him alone to do so.

A knock at the door a few moments later meant that Harry's hopes were about to founder. "Yes?"

Charlie pushed open the door. "Are you alright?"

Harry shook his head, glad it was only Charlie. "I've... I've..." Harry was unable to get the words out, and not wanting to break down, he stopped speaking.

Able to see how upset Harry was, Charlie marched into the bedroom, sat down on Ron's bed, and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry, don't you like your gift?" As he did so, Charlie noticed his mother standing in the doorway, and he almost imperceptibly shook his head to tell her that he would not require her help. Worried about Harry, Molly pulled back and out of Charlie's sight but she stayed on the landing listening.

Taking several deep breaths before he was able to speak without bursting into tears, Harry finally told Charlie what had upset him. "It's just that I've never had anything like this before."

Charlie had no idea whether Harry was upset or moved by his mother's gift. "What do you mean?"

"It doesn't matter." As he regained his composure, Harry began to sink back into his shell.

"You're going to tell me otherwise I'm going to feed you to one of my dragons." Charlie's voice was firm but gentle at the same time.

Harry was still reluctant to share what was wrong. "I really shouldn't tell you."

"Then don't." Charlie was not going to push Harry. "But if you want to talk, then I'll listen to you."

Harry understood that he did not have to tell Charlie what was bothering him but that if he wanted to, then Charlie would listen. Trusting Charlie, Harry therefore decided to reveal why he was so upset. "My relatives have never bought me anything for Christmas, and this present is the first decent thing I've ever had." On his tenth birthday Harry had received a coat hanger and a pair of his Uncle Vernon's old socks, but he hardly considered those decent gifts and certainly not something worth mentioning.

Charlie was shocked. "Never?"

"Aunt Marge, Uncle Vernon's sister did give me a box of stale dog biscuits once," Harry admitted.

Charlie's voice reflected his disgust. "Stale dog biscuits? How could anyone treat someone like that?"

Needing to talk to someone, Harry ended up opening up to Charlie in a way he had never done to anyone else, not even Minerva or Albus. "They did it because they hate me, and..." And so Harry revealed what he had gone through growing up; the beatings; how he had been ostracized at school; how he had acted stupider than he really was; and about his hopes of escaping it all. He even revealed that Minerva had taken over as his guardian.

When Harry had finished, Charlie was not exactly astonished that Harry had reacted as he had done to the simple handmade gift. But when Harry had been speaking, Charlie had picked up on one emotion that had seemed to tinge Harry's recitation. "Harry, you don't believe that how your family treated you was your fault, do you?"

"Sometimes." Harry confirmed Charlie's suspicion. "I tried so hard to please them, I really did. But nothing ever seemed to be good enough."

Charlie thought over what he had been told before finally deciding on what to say to Harry. "Harry, you know what happened to me last week, don't you?"

"Yes." Harry was unable to see what this had to do with his family's treatment of him but he was about to find out.

"Well, your relatives are just like the mother dragon, Dravina, who attacked me." Charlie supplied the name of the Romanian Longhorn whose egg had been stolen from her. "Your relatives hate you because they fear you and the magic inside of you in the same way that Dravina feared what I'd do to her, even though she was far more powerful than me. And although you can do magic, because they're adults, your aunt and uncle hold more power than you, and they know it."

"Sorry, but I don't understand what you're trying to tell me." Harry looked up at Charlie through his eyelashes, half-expecting him to be wearing an exasperated or angry look.

Charlie was experiencing anger but not at Harry, and he was also taking care not to show it. "That's okay." Charlie then went on to simplify his explanation. "Harry, the major difference between Dravina and your relatives, is that Dravina's attack was instinctual but your relatives knew exactly what they were doing. They were responsible for their actions, and as such they should take the blame and not you."

Harry let Charlie's words sink in before answering him. "So it really wasn't my fault that my relatives hurt me?"

"Absolutely not," Charlie assured the young boy. "Harry, your relatives' treatment of you was utterly wrong. And if your aunt had had one shred of decency she would have apologized to you for her ill-treatment of you when the Headmaster left." Charlie, like Harry, had no idea about what had transpired between Petunia and Albus but being older than Harry, and being reasonably familiar with the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Charlie had assumed quite rightly that

Albus had taken the woman to task. "But she didn't. Instead she chose the coward's way out and she mistreated you instead."

Harry was intrigued by Charlie's words. "I always thought I was the coward because I was afraid of Aunt Petunia."

"You're not a coward, Harry." Wanting Harry to understand that he meant every word, Charlie made sure that he was staring into Harry's eyes when he spoke. "You were just a scared little boy who had no-one to turn to, and you had every right to be afraid of your aunt. And you are scared of her even now, aren't you?" Charlie had been unable to detect any real fear in Harry's voice when he had mentioned Vernon during his talk with Harry, but Charlie had easily been able to determine that Harry was afraid of his aunt.

"Yes, and..." Harry's words suddenly dried up. He felt ashamed that he was afraid of his aunt especially when he considered what had happened to Charlie, and when he thought about what he had contemplated at the thought of having to return to his hated childhood home, he became even more ashamed.

"And what, Harry?" Charlie was not going to let Harry clam up now.

"I have to go back for two weeks at the start of the summer, and... and... I thought about running away," Harry blurted out.

Charlie kept up the pressure. "Why, Harry?"

Harry hung his head as he told Charlie why and about what he had planned. "Because I love it at Hogwarts, and I don't want to go back to my relatives. I was going to use the money I'd taken from my account to try to get a room somewhere for the two weeks before Aunt Minnie got me."

Charlie could understand Harry's desire to run from what frightened him, but he was determined to make sure that Harry was aware that he should not choose this option, no matter how badly he wanted to. "Running away won't solve anything. And people would worry about you. What you have to remember, Harry, is that your aunt is afraid of you and what you can do. When you spend time with her, try and remember that just like Dravina, she is more afraid of you than you are of her."

Mentioning Dravina gave Harry food for thought. "When Dravina hurt you, were you scared?"

"Very much." Charlie had believed that he was going to die but he did not reveal that to Harry. However, he did want Harry to know that it was okay to be scared of things.

"How do you deal with being scared?" Harry asked, hoping Charlie could provide him with the answer of how to deal with his own fears.

"In a situation like Dravina's, I wasn't scared until after she had hurt me." Charlie had been running on instinct and adrenalin up until that point. "But when I was scared, I thought about my Mum and her promise."

Harry was now confused. "What do you mean?"

"When I was little, I wandered off." As a child, Charlie had had a bad habit of doing so, and normally he had made it home by himself but one particular occasion had been very different. "By the time Mum had found me it was dark and I was terrified. But instead of telling me off as most parents would have done, Mum just said that any time after that, if I was ever lost or scared, all I had to do was sit tight and think of her, and no matter what, she would come and get me. So when Dravina attacked me, I found myself thinking of Mum."

"But your mum was in England then, and she wouldn't have been able to get you," Harry pointed out.

"You've seen the clock in the sitting room, haven't you?" Charlie answered with a question.

Harry nodded; he loved the clock. "Yes."

"Well, when Dravina attacked me, the hand that represents me moved to mortal peril, and Mum noticed." Charlie smiled softly to himself, remembering what had happened. "I was barely conscious when I felt myself floating, and I heard Mum's voice telling me that she was there."

"She went all the way to Romania?" Harry's voice held a hint of awe.

"Yes." No-one had been more surprised than Charlie to hear his mother. It was only afterwards when Charlie had regained consciousness that Molly revealed that she had used the portkey Arthur had purchased for their intended visit to Charlie in Romania. "When I needed her, she was there for me. I think she would have even taken on the dragon if she had had to."

"I wish I had someone like that." Harry's voice had become sad.

"You do." Charlie had no idea why but during their talk he would begun to feel just as protective towards Harry as he did towards his winged charges. "You've got me now."

Harry did not believe Charlie. "But you barely know me."

"That doesn't matter." Charlie brushed Harry's protest aside. "If you need me, I'll be there for you, Harry. You're going to be part of this family now."

Molly, who was already in tears after listening to Harry, and then hearing Charlie's words about her, she struggled to hold back even more tears at hearing Charlie's promise to Harry. She knew better than Harry that Charlie was someone who kept their word; he was a little like her in that regard. Realizing that Charlie really did not need her help, Molly wiped her eyes and headed back downstairs.

Inside the bedroom, Harry's eyes were wide, still unable to believe that someone he had known for less than a week appeared to care more for him than his relatives, who had known him for most of his life. "But what about your family? What if they don't like it?"

"Harry, my family will support me in whatever I do. That's what loving families are all about." Charlie gave Harry a lopsided grin. "And besides, your relatives don't deserve you, and I believe I do."

Harry smiled back at Charlie's cocky comment. "You deserve me?"

"Don't you think so?" Charlie's voice had become light and teasing, but his face had taken on the pretence of looking hurt. "Or aren't I good enough for you?"

Harry immediately tried to wipe away the despondent look. "Of course you are."

"Then that's settled." Charlie smiled widely, but he was still aware that it would take Harry a lot longer to actually well and truly believe that he would be there for him. "Now wash your face, and we'll go get some breakfast."

Harry's face immediately took on an apprehensive look that Charlie translated without problem. "Don't worry, no-one's going to finger point or laugh at you. If they do, then they'll answer to me."

With Charlie championing him, Harry was able to do as Charlie said. But he need not have worried, for no-one said anything to Harry about his outburst before breakfast. It was only afterwards that Harry was approached, and by a most unlikely source.

Harry was sitting in front of the fire watching the flames flicker and twist into shapes which, if he looked hard enough, looked like animals or people he knew, when Ron coughed to interrupt his thoughts. "Yes?"

"I was wondering if you would like a game of chess," Ron suggested.

Not wanting anything to do with Ron, Harry found an easy excuse to say no. "I've never played before, so I don't think so."

Ron, however, was not put off. "That's okay. I'll teach you."

Not wanting to make a scene, Harry had little choice but to acquiesce when Ron pulled a rounded piece of wood that acted as small table between the two of them and began to set up the board and pieces. Harry resigned himself to the fact that he was going to learn to play chess whether he wanted to or not, and noticing Molly watching them, he asked about the hand-carved chessmen. "Is this your chess set?"

"Yeah. It was my grandfather Weasley's." Ron placed the final piece onto the board, and he began to explain. "Now, to move you..."

Harry's first few games were disastrous as he began to try and learn how each piece moved. It did not help that Ron's chessmen were not exactly co-operative. It took Arthur Weasley's intervention for Harry to finally get some help by providing the two boys with a Muggle chess set. "I was given this by a Muggle who I helped with a

fireplace that somehow managed to get connected to the floor network." Arthur did not bother to tell Harry that the Muggle had been obliviated afterwards and probably would never remember giving the chess set to him.

Ron scowled. "But they don't move, Dad."

"This will be better for Harry while he learns the game." Arthur ordered Ron's chessmen back into their box, and grumbling, they did as he had demanded.

Ron then set up the new pieces, and he began explaining the rules all over again. This time Harry finally began to understand how the game worked now that his chessmen were no longer arguing with each other and shouting at him. And after Ron had beaten him three times on the run, Harry finally made a move he thought meant he was going to win. "Check."

Ron sat for a moment, working out all of his possible moves, before knocking over his king. He stared in amazement at Harry. "You've really never played before?"

Harry shook his head. "No."

Charlie glanced over. "You beat Ron?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah."

Charlie grinned at Ron's shocked face. "I told you that one day you'd come across someone who could beat you."

"But Harry's never played before," Ron protested.

"Perhaps he was a great chess player in another life," Charlie teased his brother.

Unaware that one day Charlie's seemingly innocent words would come back to haunt him, Harry shook his head. "I don't see how. I couldn't win when the pieces were moving."

"But you still won," Charlie pointed out.

"Boys, time to wash up," Molly said as she came into the sitting room. And with her order, all talk about chess ended.

As Harry headed off to clean his hands, he found himself wondering why Ron had suddenly changed his attitude and had entered into what could only be described as an almost friendly truce between the two boys. Harry had no way of knowing that Ron's absence from the sitting room before breakfast had been because he had been in the bathroom, the bathroom right next door to the bedroom to where Harry had fled.

Ron had therefore overheard everything that had been discussed between Charlie and Harry through the paper thin walls. And Ron had been stunned to learn that the young boy had never received a Christmas present before except for a crappy box of inedible dog biscuits, and he had been horrified when he had learnt what Harry had gone through growing up. He, like Neville, had assumed that Harry had been treated like a pampered prince at home, and to find out that they had gotten it totally wrong had made Ron think. So, when he had spotted Harry looking into the fire and trying not to make eye contact with anyone else, Ron had put himself in Harry's shoes. And wanting to make Harry feel comfortable, he had come up with the idea of inducting Harry into his favorite game. And after playing chess with Harry, Ron found himself nurturing a tiny hope that the two boys could actually become friends. A hope that was about to increase after dinner.

Next Chapter: Harry meets a former friend of his father's; Harry receives a rare Christmas gift.

Note: A few grammatical changes, and some insertions. The next chapter is where things start to change more significantly from the original story.

Chapter 11: The Invisibility Cloak

Harry exchanged almost shy smiles with Ron as the two boys passed each other at top of the stairs, with Ron heading to take Harry's place in the bathroom. After making his way downstairs, Harry headed into the kitchen. "Can I help, Mrs. Weasley?"

Everyone in the Weasley clan knew only too well to keep clear of the kitchen when Molly was cooking on holidays as she tended to get a little frazzled. But after Harry's upset, Charlie was confident that Molly would not treat Harry in the same way she treated them. She did not. "Of course you can, Harry. You can help Ginny lay the table." With Harry heading to join Ginny, Molly decided that it was time that the other boys helped as well, and so she poked her head out of the kitchen to tell them exactly that. "Bill, can you get the wineglasses from the cupboard; Percy, you can get the plates out; George, Fred, you can make sure we have enough chairs, and Charlie, you can take it easy."

Arthur was already busy opening the bottle of red wine that Minerva had sent over with Harry as a way of saying thank you for taking Harry in, and Ron had managed to escape doing anything, joining everyone only after it had all been done. Bill and Arthur had used magic to move the sofas so that they could add an extra leaf onto the dining table, and Harry wondered why there were more place settings than people. "Is someone else coming to dinner, Mrs. Weasley?"

Bustling in with large bowls of roast and mashed potatoes floating in front of her, Molly was a little hot and bothered as she answered Harry. "Yes."

Harry was therefore left wondering who the mystery guests were but his curiosity was soon sated. Barely two minutes had gone by when the fireplace flared up, and Minerva McGonagall stepped through, brushing dust from her unusually bright green robes, which were trimmed with a red tartan plaid. As soon as she had taken care of her appearance she greeted Harry. "Merry Christmas, Harry."

"Merry Christmas, Professor." Harry thought he would do better to keep things on a formal footing since he did not know if anyone other than Charlie was aware of Minerva's status as his guardian.

"Merry Christmas, Minerva." Molly swept back into the room with yet more food.

"Merry Christmas, Molly." Minerva turned as the fire flared up again. "It looks as though you have more guests, Molly."

Harry stared at the strange man who stepped out of the fireplace who was greeting Mrs. Weasley. "Merry Christmas, Molly."

After placing down her bowls of food, Molly hurried over to the tired looking man and drew him into an affectionate hug. "Remus, it's wonderful to see you."

Remus hugged the woman carefully, taking care not to squeeze her too tightly. "You look fantastic, Molly."

As Remus released her, Molly looked up into his face and gently cupped it. "And you look tired and as if you haven't been eating properly. Go sit down and I'll get Arthur to get you a beer."

Arthur came striding in, and he shook Remus' hand vigorously. "Remus, nice to see you."

Once Remus had finished greeting Arthur, and Arthur had left in search of the beers that Molly had promised, Minerva was hugged by the new arrival, and then she turned to Harry. "Remus Lupin, this is Harry Potter."

Harry was shocked to see that the man had tears in his eyes and he sighed almost unconsciously, believing that this man was going to be like everyone else. But he did greet him politely. "I'm pleased to meet you, Sir."

Remus had been unable to miss Harry's reaction, and he could feel the boy's resigned dismay. "Likewise, Harry. It's been a long time since I've seen you." He gave a wry smile. "Actually the last time I saw you, you were throwing up all over James' face."

Harry's demeanor immediately changed as he realized that his man had known him before he had been taken to live with the Dursleys. "You knew my parents?"

"I was one of your dad's best friends," Remus revealed.

Harry's excitement grew immensely. "So you could tell me something about them?"

"I could tell you lots of things," Remus said, and he caught Minerva's eye. "But I doubt Minerva would appreciate some of my stories."

"And it's time for dinner," Molly said firmly. "We're just waiting on the last of our guests now."

Almost on cue, the fireplace flared up, and Harry's face brightened even more when Susan stepped out of the fireplace. "Susan, what are you doing here?"

"There was an emergency at BritAD and Aunt Amy had to go into work. She contacted Mrs. Weasley earlier this morning and asked if she didn't mind me coming here as I wanted to see you," Susan quickly explained, before apologizing to Molly. "I hope that I'm not going to be a nuisance, Mrs. Weasley."

"You're not, Susan, dear." Molly did not care how many people she had to deal with. As far as she was concerned, it was a case of the more the merrier. And she knew Susan well because of Arthur's position at the Ministry.

"In that case, can I help?" Susan offered.

Molly had finished cooking, and now all that remained was to transport whatever remained in the kitchen to the extended dining table. "Yes, you and Ginny can come and collect some dishes."

Minerva smiled at Harry before following Molly and the girls into the kitchen to help them with the delivery of the massive Christmas meal. Soon the table was groaning with a mass of gastronomic delights, which included among other things, a brown crispy skinned turkey, mini chipolata sausages wrapped in streaky bacon, roasted parsnips and carrots, bread sauce, cranberry sauce, sprouts, bread rolls, and pats of fresh butter. A large Christmas pudding was sitting on a side table just waiting to have a little alcohol poured over it and ignited. And at the side of the pudding there sat a white bowl that contained whipped cream.

Molly beamed happily as she surveyed the spread in front of her. "I think that's it. I was expecting a few more people though."

Just as before, the fireplace flared up, and once again someone Harry knew popped out. "Merry Christmas, everyone."

Molly hurried over and hugged the young girl. "Merry Christmas, Luna. I'm so glad you came."

Xenophilius Lovegood followed Luna out of the fireplace. "Merry Christmas to one and all."

"Phil, nice to see you." Arthur shook hands with his neighbor. "I was beginning to think you wouldn't make it."

"I got a little carried away reading." Phil smiled at Luna. "Luna had to drag me away."

"I was hungry," Luna told everyone, as she eyed the stranger.

"I'm glad to hear it," Molly said. She then turned to Remus. "I'm sure you know Phil already."

Remus did and he shook hands with the man. "It's good to see you again." He then turned his attention to Luna. "I'm Remus Lupin, and you must be Luna."

Luna smiled a little shyly at Remus. "I am."

It was then that Molly realized that Susan had not been introduced. "And the young lady with Harry is Susan Bones, Madam Bones' niece."

Susan waved and Remus smiled at her, before looking faintly embarrassed as his stomach growled. "Sorry. It's just that everything smells so good."

Molly pulled out her chair. "In that case I think that it's time we ate. Now everyone take a seat and tuck in."

Harry had no chance to talk privately to either of his friends as, with their mouths watering, everyone sat down, and Harry found himself book-ended between Susan and Ginny, both of whom kept trying to

give him food. George and Fred were delighted at the obvious vying to serve Harry, and they would have teased their friend about it but a warning look from their mother stopped the boys in their tracks. Dinner progressed smoothly once Harry's plate was full but after his strange morning, he found the whole experience a little disconcerting. And the moment dinner was over, he fled to sit next to Charlie, who had moved to sit on the more comfortable sofa. Luna soon joined them and sat on the other side of Charlie. She had been thoroughly amused by how Ginny and Susan had fawned over Harry but she did not get a chance to tease Harry since the main present giving began moments later. Harry noticed Remus excuse himself and head into Arthur's tiny study. Harry wished he could follow him to ask about his parents but he was well aware that Molly would be unlikely to be impressed if he did so.

Molly glanced around. "So who wants to go first?"

"I do." Wanting to get it out of the way and hoping to be able to have a quiet word with Remus, Harry jumped up and grabbed the pile of gifts he had placed under the tree. He then went around the Weasley family handing out the token gifts he had bought with Minerva's help. She had picked well. Arthur had been ecstatic with his book on Muggle electronics, and Molly had delightedly hugged Harry for her magical cookery stand, which would float after her supporting whatever cookbook she was using and read out the instructions. Harry had bought confectionary for the siblings he did not really know that well, not wanting to be too ostentatious.

Luna, who had already received her gift, smiled up at Harry who was now hovering nervously as the Weasley siblings finished opening their gifts. "Thank you for my bracelet." Luna lifted it up to show Harry that she was wearing it. "Your gift is under the tree."

Harry had already spotted the gift with his name on that had been wrapped in bright yellow paper with smiling faces on it; totally un-Christmassy but very much Luna. "Thanks, I'll open it in a little while."

While Harry had been talking to Luna, Ron had opened up his gift from Harry to find a massive container of boxed chocolate frogs, one of his favorite sweets. "Thank you, Harry."

"I wasn't sure what to buy you but Professor McGonagall said you were fond of those." Harry took one of the frogs when Ron offered up the container to him.

"I love them." Then, remembering his manners, Ron handed the frogs around to everyone in the room. Only once everyone had taken a frog, did Ron open up one of the boxed frogs himself and slip it joyfully into his mouth. After savoring the rich milky chocolate flavor, Ron removed and examined the wizarding card that the box had contained. He sighed disappointedly. "Morgana. I've already got her."

Luna swallowed the last of her frog. "Do you collect the cards?"

Ron nodded. "I'm just missing Agrippa and Ptolemy."

On hearing that, Harry glanced down at the card in his hand, before handing it over to Ron. "Here, you might like this one then."

Ron's whoop of joy filled the room. "Agrippa!" He then sobered up and offered it back to Harry. "You should keep it. They're really hard to find."

"No, thanks." Harry refused the card. "I don't collect them."

Ron's hopes of becoming friends with Harry were given a boost with Harry's gesture. "Thanks, mate."

Harry remembered telling Ron that he had never be his mate but given how the situation between the two of them had changed only that morning, he simply smiled instead. "You're welcome."

Nursing his coveted card, Ron sat back down, and the little spark of hope that Harry might be willing to be his friend after all grew even brighter.

The present giving then continued, and it was about to be Harry's turn to be delighted, and more than a little astounded when Minerva handed over what could only be a broomstick. "Merry Christmas, Harry."

Harry ripped off the wrapping paper to discover a Nimbus 2000. "I can't accept this."

"Yes, you can." Minerva's voice was firm. "You need a decent broomstick, and I will not let my charge ride around on something substandard."

"Your charge?" Percy caught onto the mention.

"Even though he will be returning to stay with his relatives for the first two weeks of the summer holidays, for all intents and purposes I have taken over Harry's guardianship." Minerva fixed the twins and Ron with a steely eye. "Something that is not to be mentioned at school." Only Percy avoided being bestowed with the glare, Minerva more than aware of Percy's being a stickler for doing as he was told.

All three boys promised they would say nothing, Ron more ardently than his brothers. Running an awed hand over the broomstick, Harry got up and shyly hugged Minerva, able to do so now that the cat was out of the bag. "Thanks, Aunt Minnie."

"Make me proud." Minerva returned Harry's hug before winking at him. "At least your team has already faced Gryffindor, so I don't have to warn you off."

Harry grinned at Minerva. "There's always next year." Harry had completely forgotten that he did not intend to try out again despite Charlie's exciting tales of games from times gone by.

As this was going on, Charlie had gotten up and limped upstairs. When he came back down, the circle had reached Harry again. "Before you open that, I have something for you."

Harry took the gloves from Charlie. They were far older than his own gloves, but like them, they were made of leather. However, these had a well-worn look and feel to them. "Are these yours?"

"I was wearing them when Gryffindor won the Quidditch Cup in my final year." Charlie had not passed them on to the twins since beaters wore a totally different type of glove. "And I'd like you to have them."

"But you must love them, otherwise you wouldn't have kept them." Harry ran a finger over the softened butter colored leather.

"I do love them, and I expect you'll love them just as much." Charlie sat back down, before adding his own warning. "And I also expect you to make me proud. And don't think I won't expect an account of your first game, because I will."

Touched by the gift, Harry swallowed hard, his threatened tears of that morning not far away again. "Thank you."

Sitting beside Bill, Ginny was a little jealous; she had hoped to become a seeker for Gryffindor, and that Charlie, her favorite brother, would pass the gloves on to her. Trying to hide her disappointment and envy, she turned to Minerva. "Professor, will other first years be allowed to be seekers?"

Knowing why Ginny was asking, Ron snorted. "You can't even fly."

"Yes, I can," Ginny snapped at her brother. "And I wasn't talking to you."

Minerva hid a smile at the siblings' exchange. "Harry's appointment was a one-off and was due to extreme circumstances."

Ginny's face fell. "I was hoping I'd get a chance at being the seeker for Gryffindor. Fred said that your current seeker is leaving at the end of the year."

"How do you know you'll get into Gryffindor?" Luna asked.

"All of our family has been in Gryffindor," Ginny pointed out. "So of course I'm going to get into that house."

Bill, who had been largely silent up until then, coughed. "Um, you might not, Gin. I nearly ended up somewhere else first. I had to beg to be allowed to go into Gryffindor."

Unaware of this, the entire Weasley clan turned their focus on Bill, Molly's voice reflecting her bemusement. "You never said."

"I was too embarrassed," Bill admitted.

"You were going to be put into Slytherin, weren't you?" Charlie guessed that that was the only reason why Bill would have been embarrassed. While his brother would not have been happy about

being placed in Hufflepuff, he would not have been uncomfortable about it, nor would he have felt the same way about Ravenclaw.

Bill nodded, his face burning. "Yeah. Apparently I would have done well in Slytherin."

"Well, I for one, am glad that you were one of my Lions." Minerva had been proud of Bill's achievements, which included head boy and 12 'O's in his NEWTs, the final exams that a wizard or witch took before leaving school. "But I can't deny that you do possess most of the attributes Slytherin prefers. You're ambitious, a good leader, you're resourceful, and you're a pure-blood."

"He's also quite sneaky," Molly remarked wryly, remembering more than one stunt Bill had pulled growing up as a child. "But I want all of you, as well as Ginny, to know that, no matter what house you would have been or will be sorted into, we'd still love you."

Harry's heart felt as if it had been pierced at the loving looks the Weasleys shared at that precious moment, and he found himself wishing that he too could share a moment like that. He was therefore surprised and pleased when Molly came over and hugged him. "And don't think that you're not included in that statement because you are."

After the touching gesture, the present giving resumed yet again. And Harry found himself opening gifts from his school friends. Susan had given him a framed picture of his parents that her aunt had sorted out for her, and Harry had been choked up yet again, unable to speak as his parents waved at him from the picture. Harry could see that it had obviously been taken at their wedding, Lily wearing a white dress, and James wearing a suit.

After hugging Susan, Harry opened up Hermione's gift and grinned, glad of the respite from the turmoil of emotions his gifts had so far churned up in him. "I knew she would give me something like this."

George had received the same gift, a homework reminder calendar, and he scowled. "What is she trying to tell me?"

"I think it's the perfect gift for you," Molly said firmly. She often wished her twins would apply themselves, and she hoped that George might now at least try a little harder.

Harry sniggered at Molly's comment, before turning his attention to his gift from Justin, which turned out to be a small portfolio of shares; something Justin's father had advised his son to give. Harry thought it a typically sensible Justin gift, and he put it aside.

Susan glanced at it. "I received the same thing. Aunt Amy's going to deposit it in Gringotts for me."

"I'll have to do the same thing before I go back to school if I can." Harry had no idea whether the shares would ever be valuable but he decided that he had better take care of them just in case. He then found himself holding the bright yellow gift that had been from Luna. After ripping off the paper, Harry discovered a pile of back issues of the Quibbler, which nearly all featured dragons on the front cover. Harry decided that they would be something he would read when he was alone. He smiled at Luna. "They're just what I needed."

Luna's delight was obvious as she jumped up from her seat and hugged Harry. "I wasn't sure if you would prefer to learn about Crumple-Horned Snorkacks or dragons."

"The dragons are ideal." Harry had no wish to learn about Snorkacks, and out of the corner of his eye he could see Susan trying to smother a laugh. After being released by Luna, Harry watched the others opening their presents before he moved onto his next gift, a small mixed gift box containing joke items from Zonkos, the twins clubbing together to get Harry something. The three of them exchanged knowing smiles, Harry having bought them something similar.

Finally, Harry reached a haphazardly wrapped gift. Untying the cord from around the silver paper, Harry thought at first that he had been given a curtain. Instead, it turned out to be a cloak. As Harry shook it out, a note dropped to the floor, which Luna picked up. "Shall I read it?"

"Go ahead." Harry put the cloak around his shoulders before Luna could begin.

Ginny gave a small scream of shock at the sight of just Harry's head appearing to float in mid-air. "Your body's vanished."

Ron's jaw hit his chin. "That's an invisibility cloak. They're very rare."

"Who's it from?" Charlie asked.

Remembering the note in her hand, Luna read it out loud.

'Harry,

This belonged to your father, and I believe he would have wanted you to have it.

AD,

Remus chose that moment to come out of the study, hearing the commotion. "I see you have James' cloak then."

Minerva had not been very pleased when she had discovered what Albus had been planning to give Harry, and she had made her objections known. Just as he had with the quidditch challenge, Albus had overruled her, and he had wrapped up the cloak that James had placed in his possession. But Minerva had come around when Albus had pointed out that Harry was not the sort to break rules and use the cloak for pranks, as both he and Minerva knew James Potter and his friends had. "As long as Harry doesn't use it as you four used to, then I'll allow him to keep it."

Harry's emotions again seesawed between joy and sadness that he was actually touching something that had belonged to his father. After a few moments, he recovered himself and let everyone else look at the cloak. As he did, he was cornered by Remus. "Did you really use it for something bad, Sir?"

"You can call me, Remus, Harry," Remus said, before returning to the subject of the cloak. "And yes, we did." He lowered his voice so that Minerva would be unable to overhear him. "We used to sneak out at night under it until we got caught one day by Minerva and she refused to let James bring it into school again."

"I can hear you, Remus Lupin," Minerva warned Remus, but she again showed her confidence in Harry. "But unlike you, Harry is not a rule breaker." As she said it, she had no idea that Harry was going to become exactly that by using the cloak.

Unaware of what was yet to come, Harry assured his new guardian that he would not be acting like his father and Remus. "I won't use it for anything like that, Aunt Minnie. It's just fun to have something like this."

By now the cloak had reached Ron, and he looked hopefully at Harry. "Can I try it on, Harry?"

Harry immediately nodded. "Of course."

Again Ron's hope of friendship grew all the more at Harry's words, and with slightly shaky hands, he slipped the cloak around him. Of course, everyone else wanted to try it, but soon the excitement died down, and Harry was able to sit down and relax and have a few quiet words with Remus, Arthur offering up the use of his study. "Sir, I mean, Remus, why have I never met you before?"

"You have, but you don't remember," Remus said. "As I said earlier, you were just a baby when I last saw you."

"Did I really throw up on my Dad?" Harry asked, remembering exactly what Remus had said.

Remus nodded. "He had been swinging you around in the air over his head and the inevitable happened. Your mum just laughed." Remus grinned. "Actually, so did I."

Harry smiled, grateful to have even the smallest bit of information, even if it wasn't particularly pleasant. "Can I ask you some more things?"

"I have to leave in ten minutes," Remus said, although it was said with regret. "But fire away."

Harry spent the next ten minutes firing as many questions as he could think of at Remus, before Remus regretfully glanced at his watch. "I'm really sorry, Harry, but I have to go."

Although Minerva had talked to Harry about his parents, she did not have the same background knowledge as Remus, and Harry was therefore unwilling to let go of the tenuous grip he had on Remus. "May I write to you, Remus?"

Remus nodded. "I don't have a fixed address at the moment, but your owl will find me."

Harry found himself wondering why Remus had no fixed address, but he politely said nothing. "Thank you." He then held out his hand. "It was nice to meet you."

Remus shook Harry's hand. "Likewise, Harry." Then he turned and headed back out, and drawing Arthur to one side, he exchanged a few words with him.

Arthur then headed over to his wife. "I'm just popping into work, Molly."

Molly's face took on a rather unimpressed look. "On Christmas Day?"

"Remus needs to pick up a portkey, and I thought I'd drop in and see how the team is doing," Arthur said.

"The department won't fall apart without you," Molly said, more than a little annoyed. But aware how serious her husband took his work, and undone by Arthur's plaintive look, she nodded towards the floo. "Go ahead."

After Remus had bid farewell to everyone, Harry realized that although he knew Arthur worked at the Ministry of Magic, he had no idea what he did there. "Um, what does Mr. Weasley do?"

"Dad works in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office," Ron said, filling Harry in. "Sometimes magical items end up in Muggles' hands and Dad has to deal with it."

"And they're in work at Christmas?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Things still go astray." Bill had answered this one. "So only a skeleton team is on duty, as Christmas and holidays tend to be quite quiet. But Dad's a bit of a worrier and he likes to make sure that everything is running smoothly."

A short time later, Ron was hauled into the kitchen with his sister to help Molly clean up. This gave Susan and Luna a chance to quiz Harry. "What gives with Ron Weasley?"

Harry explained about the chess games. "I don't know why he did it though."

"Perhaps he's still trying to suck up to you so that you'll be his friend," Susan suggested.

Harry disagreed. "I don't think that's it. I've had to share a room with him every night and he's said nothing to me until today. If he was really angling to be my friend, he would have tried sooner. And to be honest he hasn't even mentioned anything about being my friend, so I honestly don't know what's changed."

Neither Susan nor Luna had any idea what it might be either. But Luna did not really want to talk about Ron, and she therefore asked Harry in a hushed voice if he had found anything about Mr. Flamel yet. Susan butted in at the mention of the unfamiliar name. "Who's Mr. Flamel?"

Harry had intended to keep quiet about what Luna had discovered but now the cat was out of the bag, and he had little choice except to tell Susan what Luna had done. "... and so whatever Fluffy is guarding, it has something to do with this mysterious Mr. Flamel."

Susan tried to recall if she had ever come across the name, but she came up blank. "I've never heard of him."

"Neither have I." Luna had looked through the books in her Dad's library. "And I went through all the stuff on wizards we own but most of the books are on animals."

"That's okay." Harry would have liked to know who Mr. Flamel was but he was not chafing at the bit to find out. "I'm not really that interested."

The conversation subsequently turned to other things, and the three of them chatted together until Minerva declared that they had to return to Hogwarts in order for Susan's aunt to collect her. Harry therefore hugged Susan and Minerva, and they both headed back to Hogwarts, Harry having decided to stay at the Weasleys and return with the twins on the Express.

Luna's own departure was imminent as well when a short time later Xenophilius announced that they had to visit relatives of Luna's mother in Ireland. Again Harry hugged a friend goodbye before being accosted by Ron, who, after finishing in the kitchen, had diplomatically kept his distance while Harry had been talking to his friends. "Do you want to play chess again?"

Harry did, and so the two boys settled down in front of the fire for some more friendly battles. It was only when Harry went to bed hours later that he realized that Arthur had not returned home.

Hogwarts Express

Harry was seated in a compartment with Ron and the twins when Hermione walked by. Spotting Harry, she opened up the carriage door and stepped inside. "Harry, what are you doing here?"

"I ended up staying with the Weasleys over Christmas." Harry gave Hermione a brief explanation of events. "I didn't spot you when we boarded the train. Where are you sitting?"

"Three carriages down with Justin. I found you because I'm looking for Susan. We didn't see her on the platform before the train left," Hermione informed him, before smiling at Fred and George. "Hi, George, Fred."

"Hi, Hermione." George was brief with his greeting, not wanting to add fuel to the fire of his brother's teasing.

Sadly George's ploy failed, and Fred beamed brightly at the Gryffindor girl. "Hello, Hermione. Did you like George's present?"

Hermione's face turned beet red. "I did. Thank you for the sugar quills, George." Her face then became concerned. "Did you like your gift?"

The homework calendar was currently buried at the bottom of his trunk, placed there by his mother, and George had no intention of ever using it. But on seeing Hermione's worried look, he assured her that he had indeed been happy with it. "It's just what I needed."

"Oh good." Hermione sat down, and finally, and very reluctantly, greeted Ron. "Hello."

Ron did not greet Hermione so coldly; instead he surprised the carriage's occupants. "Happy New Year, Hermione."

Fred, George, and Harry all looked at each other in surprise, but none of them said anything. Hermione was a little taken aback but she politely returned Ron's greeting. "Happy New Year, Ron."

Ron took a deep breath and stood up. However, what he had to say did not come easily, especially since the twins and Harry were bearing witness to what he was about to do. Squaring his shoulders, Ron spat out what he wanted to say before he could change his mind. "Hermione, I... I... I owe you an apology."

Hermione resisted the temptation to wiggle a finger in her ear to check to see if she had heard him correctly. "What for?"

"For upsetting you at Halloween and for not coming to get you." Ron had been influenced by what Charlie had said to Harry, and the guilt of what he had done to Hermione had weighed heavily on Ron's mind over the Christmas period. "You're in Gryffindor, and I should have behaved better."

"Who are you, and where's my brother?" Fred could not help but ask.

Ron's already red face burned even more brightly, and he snapped angrily at his brother. "Get lost, Fred."

George was a little more sensitive to Ron's distress, and he grabbed Fred's arm. "Come on, Fred. Let's go find Lee."

The two boys left, leaving the trio alone. Harry also got up. "Perhaps I'd better go as well."

"No!" Both Ron and Hermione called out together, neither of them wanting to be left alone with the other.

"I'll stay then." Harry sat back down.

His face still a most unbecoming crimson, Ron smiled sheepishly and he held out his hand to Hermione. "Hi, I'm Ron Weasley."

Hermione looked at it suspiciously, aware that if she accepted Ron's hand, then it was likely that Ron would become her friend. Not sure if she wanted this, Hermione hesitated for a moment. Then, remembering how upset she had been when she had wanted to be friends with the other children at her primary school but they had rejected her for being a know-it-all, Hermione felt a pang of shame, and she firmly took Ron's hand. "Hermione Granger."

After shaking hands with Hermione, Ron turned to Harry and held out his hand again. "Ron Weasley."

Harry had gotten along better with Ron during the Christmas break, and like Hermione had doubts, but after how the Weasley family and Ron himself had treated him, he was not going to refuse Ron's hand. "Harry Potter."

An uncomfortable silence then fell over the group until Hermione decided to end the stalemate. "Where's Neville?"

"Dunno." In truth, Ron had almost forgotten about his friend, and feeling a little guilty, he rose to his feet. "Suppose I'd better go and look for him."

As soon as Ron closed the carriage door, Hermione turned on Harry. "What is going on with him?"

"I think Ron had an epiwhatsit." Harry could not remember the exact word he was looking for.

Hermione thought she knew what Harry was trying to say. "An epiphany?"

"Yeah," Harry agreed, and he then went on to tell Hermione about his stay at the Weasleys. The only part he left out was his conversation with Charlie. He was not ready to share that with anyone just yet. But he did tell her about Remus.

Hermione frowned. "And he never once thought to check on you?"

"Apparently the Headmaster wanted to keep me hidden," Harry said in Remus' defense, relaying some of what Remus had told him during their brief question and answer session. "But Remus said that if he could have, he would have visited me."

"Did you tell him about your relatives?" Hermione then asked.

Harry shook his head. "We didn't have that long to talk but he has said that I can write to him."

"But you hardly know him, Harry," Hermione pointed out. "Perhaps the Headmaster had a good reason not to want him around."

Harry thought that Hermione was being rather unkind to someone she had never met. "He's really nice and he's really good friends with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and with Aunt Minnie."

Now aware that Minerva was Harry's guardian, and that she would never have let Harry fraternize with someone unsafe, Hermione decided to back off. "Just be careful."

"I will," Harry said, and then he turned the conversation to Ron. "I didn't expect Ron to apologize to you."

"Neither did I," Hermione had to admit. "Nor that he would be nice to you." She mulled it over. "Perhaps his mother told him he had to be nice to you."

"I don't think so otherwise he would have been nice from the start. I don't know what but something definitely happened to change his attitude." Harry still had no idea that Ron was privy to what Harry had endured growing up.

"Well, whatever it was, Ron will probably want to hang around with us now," Hermione warned Harry. "Even though he's friends with Neville, I don't think that it was through choice. I think it was more because there was no-one else."

Harry had not realized that. "At least I can escape to Hufflepuff unlike..." Harry stopped speaking as the door opened. "Justin, Susan, hi."

"I was feeling abandoned, so I went looking for Susan when Hermione didn't come back." Justin explained why he had their missing friend in tow. "So did you have a good Christmas at the Weasleys, and what news do you have?"

It was evident Susan had filled Justin in on where Harry had spent most of the Christmas holidays. "I did have a good holiday, and I don't really have any news."

"He got an invisibility cloak," Susan revealed what she thought was important. "And a brand new broomstick."

"Who bought you a broomstick?" Being a Quidditch fanatic, Justin was most interested in the second gift.

"Professor McGonagall." Harry had received permission from his guardian to bring Justin into the circle of people who knew about his new living arrangements, and he did so then.

Justin was really happy as he knew slightly more than Hermione did about Harry's home life. "I'm seriously pleased for you."

"So what news do you have?" A little uncomfortable at being the center of attention, even amongst his friends, Harry questioned Justin.

"Nothing as exciting as your news." Justin had had a quiet Christmas. "It was just the usual holiday." Justin therefore quickly moved onto a different subject. "Susan said that you have something to tell us."

Harry couldn't think what that might be. "Such as?"

Susan reminded Harry about what he had tried to hide from them. "Such as your shopping trip to Diagon Alley where you bumped into Luna."

With Susan jogging his memory, Harry came clean to his other two friends. "Um, I didn't exactly tell you everything about the conversation I had with Luna."

"And?" Hermione's voice was rather demanding.

"Luna asked Hagrid about what Fluffy was hiding," Harry revealed.

Justin leant forward. "And what is it?"

"He refused to tell her." Harry watched looks of dismay and annoyance settle onto his friends' faces, and he hurried to tell them the most important part. "But he did let slip that whatever Fluffy is guarding, it's between the Headmaster and a Mr. Flamel."

"I know that name." Hermione's brow wrinkled, her annoyance forgotten as she struggled to recall where she had come across the name before. And her frustration was reflected on her face when she was unable to pull up the memory. "Darn it. I can't remember where I saw it."

Justin drew a total blank. "I've never heard of him."

"I hadn't either," Susan admitted. "And I didn't dare ask Aunt Amy. She would have wanted to know why I wanted to know."

"It doesn't matter anyway," Harry consoled his friends. "It's not as if we're going to be searching for the item in question."

"I know that." Hermione, however, was unable to hide her irritation with the unsolved mystery. "But I'd like to have some sort of idea as to what that dog is guarding or who this Flamel person is."

"Perhaps you'll remember who he is when we get back to school," Susan interceded. "But right now I think Harry should show you his invisibility cloak. It's really amazing."

Distracted by Susan's suggestion, all thoughts of the mysterious Mr. Flamel were pushed aside when the four children took turns at using Harry's cloak to sneak up and down the train.

Next Chapter: Harry and Hermione encounter Neville's mirror

Chapter 12: Of Mirrors and Mysteries

On his return to school, Harry's year continued much in the same way as it had before Christmas except that Ron, and by extension, Neville, had become a peripheral part of their group.

On the second Saturday after they returned, Harry let his friends try out his new broomstick. Unwilling to try the broomstick, Neville had quietly fumed while Ron and Justin flew the Nimbus 2000 around the frosty quidditch pitch. Neville's disquiet had grown as Justin and Ron had bonded over their shared love of quidditch, and Ron had only been too happy to talk about the various teams that made up the wizarding world's quidditch organization. No-one noticed how quiet Neville was, nor did they make any effort to include him their conversation, and Neville slipped away without anyone realizing.

Feeling miserable, Neville headed back to Gryffindor, only for his feet to lead him to the same door he had come across the previous month. After glancing around him, he opened the door and slipped inside. It was over an hour later when Neville left, his face tear-streaked, and so he kept his head down as he headed back to the Gryffindor common room. His misery turned to anger when Ron, who had since returned from the quidditch pitch and was now playing chess with Dean, barely grunted at him. Muttering angry words under his breath, Neville headed upstairs, wishing he had stayed in the mirror room.

If he had stayed, Neville would have found himself being interrupted, for he was not to be the mirror's only visitor that day. After finishing on the quidditch pitch, Harry and Hermione had headed to the library so that Harry could complete his Charms homework. Susan and Justin had already done their homework, and so they returned to Hufflepuff, agreeing to meet up with their two friends for dinner. And it was on the way from the library to dinner that Harry found himself spotting a glint of gold coming from a door he had never noticed before.

Not usually a nosy boy, Harry was going to continue on by but there was something about the room that almost unwillingly piqued his interest, and he therefore turned back. Her head in a book as she walked, Hermione did not immediately notice that Harry had retraced his steps, and she continued walking until Harry called out to her. "Hermione, come here and look at this."

Hermione turned around to see what Harry wanted. As she neared the door, she too spotted a glint, and, like Harry, her curiosity rose to the forefront. Putting her book into her bag, she tried to see what was making the glint through the crack in the door without opening it. "I wonder what it is."

Harry decided he had to know, and he reached out to push open the door. "I'm going to find out."

When the door swung open and Harry walked into the room, Hermione hurriedly followed him in, not wanting to miss out on whatever they would find. However, her voice reflected her disappointment when she saw what had caught their attention. "It's just a mirror." Intending to take a closer look, she almost ran into Harry when he stopped abruptly. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know." Harry wanted to look into the mirror but at the same time he had a horrible feeling about it. "There's something off about that mirror, and it's giving me the creeps."

"It's just a mirror, Harry." Hermione sounded exasperated at Harry's reluctance, and she stepped around him to look into it. "See, it's just a... Oh my!"

Harry glanced quickly at the mirror but he was unable to see what might have made Hermione gasp. "What is it?"

Hermione took a step backwards. "You were right, Harry. This is no ordinary mirror."

Harry stepped closer, and he took notice of the writing that surrounded the frame, murmuring the words under his breath. Unlike Neville, Harry immediately worked out what the writing was and what it meant. "The mirror shows your heart's desire."

At Harry's words, Hermione frowned as she once more reviewed the image the mirror had produced for her. "But that doesn't make sense."

"Hermione, are you going to tell me what you're going on about?" Harry moved closer to the mirror, trying to see what Hermione had.

Instead of explaining her cryptic comments, Hermione positioned Harry in front of the mirror. "Look into it."

Only half-wanting to, Harry did as his friend had requested. His viewing came to an end when he reacted in a similar fashion to Hermione, exclaiming and stepping away from the mirror. "Oh!"

"What did you see?" Hermione asked, knowing that if Harry was right about the mirror's purpose, then Harry should not have seen the same image she had.

When he responded, Harry's voice was tinged heavily with sadness and more than a little envy. "I saw a loving family."

"Because it's something you've never had." A man's voice interrupted the children.

Both Harry and Hermione went red when they saw who had entered the room, Hermione apologizing for their intrusion. "I'm sorry, Sir. We saw a flash of gold through the doorway, and we decided to see what was inside."

"Don't apologize, Miss Granger." Albus stepped into the room. "It's entirely my fault. I had meant to remove the mirror from this room before now."

"Why, Sir?" Hermione glanced behind her again at the mirror, before she returned her attention back to the Headmaster.

Albus walked fully into the room, and placed himself between the children and the mirror before answering. "Because it's not entirely safe, Miss Granger."

"But it's just a magic mirror," Harry pointed out.

"I'm afraid that it's a little more than that, Harry." Albus stepped to the side, and he placed a hand on the mirror's ornate carved edge, taking care not to look into the glass itself. "This mirror is called the Mirror of Erised. And as you've probably already worked out, it shows a person's true desires; their deepest, darkest yearnings."

"So because I want a loving family that's what I'd see every time?" Harry queried.

"Unless your desires change, then yes." Albus confirmed Harry's guess. "And if I was to leave this mirror here, you would return again and again to view that vision."

"But what's wrong with that?" Harry wished Albus would step out of the way so that he could again see the family he had always desired. "It's not as though the mirror can hurt me."

Albus knew differently, but he did not go into detail as he told Harry that he was wrong. "Harry, this mirror could hurt you far more than you could ever imagine."

Hermione was unable to see how. "Can it throw spells, Sir?"

Albus was not surprised that Hermione had chosen to ask a question of that nature. "It cannot. The mirror's weapon is the image it portrays and what it does to the person who sees it."

Hermione's brain was already processing the information, and she had yet another question for the Headmaster. "Who made it?"

Albus was unable to provide Hermione with a name. "Nobody knows. But legend states that it was constructed by a dark wizard as a form of torture."

"How can seeing what you want be torture?" Harry knew he wanted a loving family but he had wanted one all of his life, and he did not see how the mirror could change that need to something harmful.

Albus realized that Hermione had probably worked out what the mirror did; her face had blossomed into understanding when he had mentioned the torture. But he took it upon himself to explain further so that Harry would also understand. "Harry, my boy, people have gone mad looking into this mirror; the thought of whether or not what they saw might happen at some point in their future becoming too much to bear."

Harry found this rather far-fetched. "But I've only looked into it once, and I'm fine."

"For the moment," Albus said, before finishing his recitation. "But sadly that was the fate that befell far too many good people who

were unable to resist the mirror's calling. And it's why I have to move it to somewhere safe."

"You don't have to do that, Professor. I won't keep coming back." However, Harry was not entirely sure that he was telling the truth about not returning. The happy, relaxed, and obviously loving family scenario he had seen had already begun to eat away at Harry's heart. This was mostly because of the time he had spent witnessing the Weasley family together over Christmas, and because as Albus had said, it was the one thing he had never had.

Albus was unable to miss the pensive tone in Harry's plea, and he had the feeling that the mirror was already influencing Harry, so he refuted Harry's claim. "I'm afraid you would, Harry." Sadly Albus knew only too well the truth behind his own words. "But unlike those who have slipped into insanity trying to find or reclaim what the mirror has shown, you should know that one day you may achieve your heart's desires. One day it's likely that you will have a loving family all of your own." He then turned to Hermione. "If I'm not being too inquisitive, may I ask what you saw, Miss Granger?"

Hermione recalled her vision. "I saw a man but I couldn't see his face because his back was turned to me. There was also a young woman with him who looked a little like me. And a crowd of people but I couldn't see their faces."

Harry was confused by what Hermione had seen. "That's it?"

"No." Hermione's voice turned wistful as she remembered the strange, almost reverent look on the woman's face. "The woman was looking at the man as if he was the only person in the room."

"Hence the faceless crowd," Albus said. He then went on to make a deduction about what he thought Hermione desired. "From what you've told us, I think we can hazard a guess and say that your heart's desire is true love, Miss Granger."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "Then I think the mirror is wrong about me."

Harry was quite intrigued; the mirror had been right about him. "Why do you think that?"

"Because I want to learn more than I want anything else in the world." Hermione's answer rang with conviction.

"That is what your head desires." Albus was well aware of how much trust Hermione placed in books and the knowledge they contained. "But as the mirror has shown you, your heart and soul seeks something entirely different, and that is true love."

Hermione could not help but continue to disagree. "I really don't think that there's anything such as true love. It's just fantasy written into fairytales so that everyone can have a happy ending."

At Hermione's response, Harry had to refrain from reminding Hermione of her crush on George Weasley. His thoughts were diverted away from George though when Albus gave the mirror a sideways glance and a brief look of sorrow flashed across the Headmaster's face. It was then that Harry became aware that while the Headmaster knew what they wanted, they had no idea of the Headmaster's desires. And so Harry asked the same question Albus had of Hermione. "Sir, can I ask what you see in the mirror?"

"Socks, my boy, socks," Albus responded in a jovial voice, any trace of the sorrow vanishing behind a bright smile. "One can never have enough socks, and I do like them." After telling them, Albus checked the time. "It's almost time for dinner."

Able to take a hint, Hermione decided that perhaps it was time they left. "I think we'd better be off, Harry. Everyone will wonder where we've gotten to."

Harry also took the hint, and the two children both then bid their Headmaster a good evening. Only once they were clear of the room, did Harry turn to Hermione. "He was lying about what he saw."

"I know," Hermione responded, a frown creasing her brow. "I wonder why."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know but whatever it was it made him sad. What do you think it might be?"

"I really don't know, Harry," Hermione said, and she stopped before the Great Hall. "But I do know that the mirror is wrong about me."

Glancing into the Hall, Harry spotted Susan waving at him. "We'll have to get together in the library later and talk about this."

Although she would have liked to have talked more, Hermione's stomach growled at her at the smell of the food coming from the Great Hall, and after agreeing to meet Harry in the library, she moved away from him to sit with the twins.

Back in the room they had just left, Albus ran a hand over the mirror. He then gave into his own cravings, looking deep into the mirror and sighing wistfully when the mirror displayed the image of the one thing he most desired in its reflection. It was an image that Albus spoke to in a sad voice, the sorrowful look Harry had spotted returning to mar his features. "You were everything I wanted, and I would have done almost anything for you. But where you went, I could not follow, and you destroyed my hopes and dreams."

Conscious that it would do no good to brood over what might have been, and what for him would never happen, Albus reached into his pocket and took something out. Whispering a spell, a white light encompassed the mirror and the object in Albus' hand, before it and the mirror vanished from the room. Sighing heavily, Albus followed in the children's footsteps and left the now empty room. As he closed the door behind him, it morphed and vanished into the wall, leaving no trace that it and the room beyond had ever existed.

It was not long before his first quidditch match that Harry overheard a conversation between Hagrid and Dumbledore. He had not meant to eavesdrop but, flying high up in the air on the unseasonably nice day, the sound of the two men's voices had drifted up to him. Harry frowned as he garnered the gist of the conversation. Not daring to land until the sound of voices had noticeably diminished, Harry flew around in circles and pondered what he had overheard. Only when he could see that the Headmaster and Hagrid had entered Hogwarts, did he land and rush back towards the school.

Once indoors, he sought out his friends and passed on what he had overheard. "I've just heard something you might want to hear." Harry then relayed what he had discovered. "So what do you think might be doing it?"

Each child shook their head and came up blank; none of them knew of any animals that would drink blood from a unicorn.

And it was just over a week later when Hermione tiredly rubbed her brow and admitted defeat. "I read every book I can find on unicorns and I've found nothing."

"Me neither." Harry glanced at Susan and Justin. "What about you two?"

"Nothing," Justin told him.

"Nor me. Maybe you should look through those magazines Luna sent you. There might be something in there," Susan suggested.

"I doubt it." Harry, however, did not really know what the magazines contained as he had not bothered to pick them up since he had been given them for Christmas, and he therefore guiltily vowed to do so that evening. However, after he and Justin had scanned all fifteen of them, they had found little to nothing on unicorns, although Harry now knew a great deal about dragons.

Justin flopped onto his bed. "So what are you going to do now?"

Harry was at a loss. "I don't know."

"Perhaps you should write to Luna," Justin suggested. "Didn't you say that she has lots of books on animals?"

"She does." Harry's face lit up. "I should have thought of that myself. I'll do it now." All fired up, Harry grabbed some parchment and a quill, and he quickly penned a letter to his friend. Then both he and Justin slipped out to find Hedwig.

Luna Lovegood opened up the letter she had just received and then smiled happily at her father as she recognized the handwriting. "It's from Harry." Her smile soon disappeared though.

Something Xenophilius noticed. "What's wrong, little one?"

"Harry wants to help Hagrid try to track down a killer. He said that it appears that something is attacking and draining blood from the unicorns in the forest around Hogwarts." Luna's voice was full of disgust. "How could anything do that to such a beautiful animal?"

Xenophilius shrugged. "I have no idea."

Luna glanced at the books on the shelves. "Perhaps one of our books will have something."

"I'll help you," Xenophilius offered.

All thoughts of unicorns were pushed aside a few days later, as Harry's first quidditch game was upon him. And, as he waited to fly out to face his opponents, Ravenclaw, Harry was filled with an excitement he had never experienced before; an excitement that exploded into sheer joy when, less than ten minutes into the game, Harry won the game for Hufflepuff. His face was aglow as he held aloft the snitch he had just caught. Around him the crowd was going wild.

The pretty Asian girl, the reserve for Ravenclaw who, like Harry, was a first time seeker, Ravenclaw's usual seeker having been knocked out within the first two minutes of the game, reached over to shake his hand. "Congratulations, Harry. You flew really well."

"Thanks. So did you." Harry had never really seen the girl before, and he was therefore at a loss as to what her first name was.

The girl did not fill him in. Instead she flew off to join her disappointed team mates.

Harry also flew off to find not only his team mates, but his Hufflepuff friends waiting for him. He handed the snitch to a delighted Justin. "Here."

"Thanks, Harry." Justin slid the victory snitch into his pocket. "That game didn't last long. Hufflepuff barely had time to score any goals."

"After Duffy was knocked out and that girl took his place, I spotted the snitch, and I could see from her face that she had as well." Harry explained his speedy ending of the game. "So I couldn't afford to wait."

"I'll say." Greg Summerby shook hands with Harry. "Good call. Although I'd have liked more points before you caught the snitch it doesn't always work out that way."

"I was hoping for the same," Harry admitted, as he pulled off the gloves that Charlie had given him at Christmas.

"Those gloves could do with updating, couldn't they?" Greg thought they were looking a little worn around the edges.

"No way." Harry ran a finger over the well-worn gloves. "They were a gift from Charlie Weasley. He wore them in his last match."

Aware of Charlie's history in quidditch, Greg changed his mind about Harry's use of the battered items. "Then you wear them. They haven't seen you wrong so far."

On that rejoinder, he peeled off from the group, just as Ron came running up. "I can't believe how quickly you caught that snitch. Can I see it?"

Justin held it out. "Harry gave it to me."

By the time the slightly more sedate Neville and Hermione reached the group, Ron was gushing over the snitch. Neville immediately thought that Harry had given it to Ron, and his jealousy bubbled up to the surface. "That's the winning snitch?"

"Yeah." Ron sighed happily as he looked at the small golden ball. "I'd love to play quidditch."

"What position?" Justin had had this conversation with Ron more than once, but it still did not stop the two boys, and now also Harry, from having yet another discussion about the subject.

Neville hid his irritation as the three boys walked ahead, leaving him with Susan and Hermione. Hermione, however, had seen Neville's face tighten momentarily. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." Neville was short with Hermione with his response. "I'm heading off to the Gryffindor common room. I have homework to get done."

"See you later." Hermione let Neville leave, and she continued her conversation with Susan.

With the excitement of the quidditch match over, the children's thoughts returned to the mystery of their unicorns. It had now been more than a week since Harry had written to Luna, and he had still heard nothing back. Trying to decide what to do, Susan suggested writing to someone other than a peer. "Harry, why don't you write to Mr. Lupin?"

Hermione shook her head. "He hardly knows him."

"We write every week," Harry revealed. He had told his friends the two of them were corresponding, but not how often. He then went on to reveal what Remus had asked in his last letter. "And he wants me to spend some time with him this Easter."

Still not entirely trusting of Remus, Hermione scowled. "Are you going to?"

Harry nodded. "I spoke to Aunt Minnie last night and she said yes." He then glanced around to make sure no-one was listening in. "But this is the best bit. In his letter Remus told me about a secret passage in Hufflepuff that leads from outside to the boys' dormitory. But I haven't had a chance to try to find it yet."

"You might get into trouble," Hermione said, a frown marring her features.

Harry tried to get Hermione to see it from his point of view. "That didn't stop the Famous Five from going looking for things."

Hermione had admitted to Harry that she had not only liked the Narnian Chronicles, but also the Enid Blyton books where a group of four children and their dog had had amazing adventures, and she knew that this was what he referring to. "Harry, this is real life."

"Which makes it even more fun," Harry protested. "Come on, aren't you a little bit curious?"

"The answer is no." Concerned that Harry would get into trouble, Hermione tried to talk him out of it. "Anyway I thought you wanted to blend into the background. Looking for adventure is hardly doing that."

"No-one's going to be watching me," Harry said. While he had no problem in having some fun, it was only the idea of being watched that bothered him.

Hermione, however, was not about to give up on her argument, and so she brought up the impropriety of what Remus had revealed. "And why would an adult tell you about a passageway like that?"

Harry grinned. "Apparently Remus, Dad, and their friends were some of the biggest troublemakers this school has ever seen."

Hermione's lips tightened all the more. "So he's encouraging you to behave badly?"

Harry shook his head. "No. He said it's for use in an emergency only."

"And yet you're going looking for it now." Hermione pointed out the flaw in Harry's argument.

"I need to know where it is in case of an emergency," Harry countered, although he was unable to think of any sort of emergency that might need him to use the passageway. "So do you want to come with me and Justin, because we're going to look for it no matter what."

Natural curiosity warred with her penchant for obeying the rules, before Hermione found herself wavering and giving in. "Well, I suppose someone has to keep an eye on you."

Justin turned to Susan. "And you?"

"Of course I'm coming with you," Susan said, before bringing up their other friends. "What about George and the others?"

Hermione was still in a distrusting mood and so she vetoed their inclusion. "I trust George but Fred would use it to cause trouble."

"Okay, so we don't tell them," Harry said. "I'm not telling Ron or Neville either. They're not in Hufflepuff."

"Neither am I," Hermione pointed out.

"But you're more or less one of us," Justin told her.

Hermione softened under Justin's words and she returned the conversation back to their original problem. "So are you going to write and ask Remus about the unicorns?"

Harry surprised her when he said no. "He's nice and everything but I don't think so. We should wait for Luna."

Aware that Harry would go without her if she refused to go, Hermione stood up. "In that case, let's go looking for secret passageways then."

Later that night

The four children had failed to find any sign of a plaque bearing a badger outside of the castle, and so they had had to give up. Harry had therefore decided that he would try from inside Hufflepuff to find the passage that way. Despite her complaints, Hermione had been more than a little disappointed to be left out. And so, with Susan joining them, it was well after midnight when Harry found the badger that Remus had told him would be on the wall in the corridor that led into the Hufflepuff boys' dormitories, Justin keeping watch. "It's all clear, Harry."

Checking around him one more time, Harry placed his wand against the plaque. "Loyalty about all else." All three children jumped as, with a grating noise, the wall slid back. Having been unsuccessful earlier that night, Harry grinned in delight. "Come on."

Justin hesitated. "What if we go in and can't get out?"

Harry poked his head inside. "There's another badger. I'll go in and touch it. If I don't come out in a few minutes, then open up the door."

More than a little nervous by the sight of the seemingly endless black tunnel, Susan balked. "Harry, do you think this is a good idea?"

In response, Harry stepped inside and touched his wand to the badger. "Loyalty above all else."

The wall slid back and a few moments later it opened up again to reveal a beaming Harry. "Come on. It's just like the adventure books I've read."

Feeling more secure about the idea, Justin and Susan followed Harry in, lighting up their wands as the wall slid closed behind them. Justin glanced around at the stone walls as they walked. "Why aren't there any cobwebs?"

"Probably magic," Harry said, his voice full of excitement as he led the way up the passage. "Come on."

A short time later, the trio found themselves at another wall, and again a badger plaque was inset into it. Harry touched his wand to it. "Loyalty above all else."

The wall slid aside to reveal a large bush. Harry squeezed through it to find he was almost at the gates to Hogwarts. "No wonder we couldn't find it. When Remus said the other entrance was outside the castle, I took him literally to mean that it would be at the wall of the castle, not underneath it."

Joining Harry, Susan could see the gates to the school from where they were standing. "At least we know where the entrance is now."

"And Mr. Lupin was right, it would be good in an emergency," Justin said, and then he gave a huge yawn. "But right now, I think it's time for bed."

Harry agreed, and he followed his friends back inside the passageway, closed it up, and then headed back towards Hufflepuff.

Two days later, at Hogwarts, Harry opened up the letter he had just received from Luna. "I didn't expect that."

"What is it?" Susan leaned over so that she could look at the letter that Harry had received.

"We couldn't find the animal that was killing the unicorns because there is no such animal." Harry and his friends had hoped to be able to come up with something to help Hagrid in his job. "Luna said that her dad said it has to be a person doing this, and a powerful one at that."

"Why powerful?" Justin asked, once he had swallowed his mouthful of bacon. "Anyone could just take a gun and shoot a unicorn so that they could drink it's blood."

"We don't use guns in the wizarding world," Susan informed him. "Every wizard knows that. Even when fighting You-Know-Who, the Ministry never resorted to using Muggle weapons. It's an unspoken law that they're not used."

"Killing's an unspoken law but You-Know-Who used to do that," Justin countered.

"It's just different." Susan did not know how to put the quirk into words.

"Anyway..." Harry interrupted, before Justin and Susan could get into an argument. "...Luna said that usually only women, forest creatures, and other unicorns can approach a fully-grown unicorn. But that's not the worst part; the worst part is that the only real reason to drink a unicorn's blood is to stave off death. Luna said that it's likely that someone or something very dangerous is roaming around the Forbidden Forest."

Susan shivered. "But this is a school full of children. Why hasn't the Headmaster said or done anything?"

"He probably doesn't want to frighten anyone, and he did ask Hagrid to try and track down the source of the attacks," Hermione pointed out. "Or perhaps whoever is out there isn't a real danger yet."

Harry tapped his finger in thought on the table. "You could be right. If they need to drink the unicorns' blood, then whoever is out there could be very weak and therefore not a threat."

"Who or what do you think it is?" Susan asked in a quiet voice.

"I have no idea." Hermione was unable to think of who would do such a thing. "You lot?"

Neither Justin nor Susan had any ideas, but Harry did. "Um, what if it's You-Know-Who?"

Justin shook his head. "Isn't he gone?"

Harry copied Justin's head shaking. "Not according to Professor Dumbledore, and it's likely something he would have to do to survive."

Hermione disparaged the idea. "Just because he can come back, doesn't mean he has. There are probably plenty of other things out there that can be classified as dangerous."

Preferring to believe that he was wrong, Harry let out a long breath. "I'm probably being silly thinking it's him."

"Definitely," Hermione said.

The children had no idea how wrong Hermione was about to be proved.

Next Chapter: Harry has a close encounter in the Forbidden Forest; Remus collects Harry for Easter.

Note: A good proportion of the next two chapters are different, as was this one, and so it will likely be a few days before I post again, as I'm working on them.

Chapter 13: A Close Call

Harry's face was alight with excitement when he met up with his Hufflepuff friends and Hermione. "Guess what?" Not giving them a chance to answer, he continued. "I know who Nicolas Flamel is."

"Nicolas Flamel?" Susan noted that Harry had now given their mysterious Mr. Flamel a first name.

"Yes. I found him by chance this morning when I was researching a history of long-lived wizards for my Easter assignment." Harry opened up his notebook where he had jotted down his notes. "He owns the Philosopher's Stone." Harry watched puzzled looks trickle over his Hufflepuff friends' faces.

Hermione, however, had become as animated as Harry, and she filled in the puzzled Hufflepuffs. "I knew I'd seen the name before. Nicolas Flamel is the only known maker of the Philosopher's Stone, which is supposed to be able to give endless life or make gold, and..."

Harry, however, was still not finished, and he broke back in before Hermione could continue. "...and I think that the Stone is being hidden here."

"Why hide it here?" Justin asked. "Isn't Gringotts the safest place for something that important?"

"I asked myself exactly the same question," Harry told him. "And..."

It was now Hermione's turn to interrupt, and her voice was full of triumph as she did so. "Of course! The break-in at Gringotts' Bank! The Headmaster must have taken the Philosopher's Stone from the Bank before the break-in, and that's why the goblins denied anything had been taken."

"But why?" Susan questioned Hermione's hypothesis.

"Because someone is obviously after it, and it wasn't safe at the Bank." Hermione explained her reasoning.

"Hermione?" Susan suddenly had a horrible thought. "Do you think that the Stone has something to do with the unicorns that are being slaughtered?"

Harry answered her. "I do." He then glanced down at the initials he had written on the page in front of him. "And I believe that whoever is killing the unicorns, is also the same person who tried to take the Philosopher's Stone from Gringotts."

"And that's why Fluffy is on the third floor," Susan said excitedly, finally cottoning on.

"Who's Fluffy?" In the middle of their excited debate, no-one had noticed Ron and Neville coming up behind them.

Harry's friends all looked to him, and he made the decision to include Ron and Neville in the conversation. "Fluffy is a three-headed dog that Hagrid owns."

"There's a three-headed dog in the building?" Ron asked. Previously having overheard Harry's conversation months earlier, he already knew the answer to his question, but he was not about to jeopardize his still fairly new friendship with Harry by revealing that. He had not, however, been aware that the dog had been called Fluffy.

Harry again took point and answered Ron. "Um, yeah."

"How do you know that?" Neville questioned Harry's claim.

"I got lost and bumped into it." Harry avoided mentioning George.

"Did it bite you?" Ron asked, not aware of what had happened once Harry had encountered the three headed beast.

"No." Harry did not admit that he had cowered in the corner. "I sang to it and it went to sleep."

Neville refused to believe Harry. "You are joking, aren't you?"

"No, he's not." Susan joined back in with the conversation. "It was on the third floor."

"I thought we weren't supposed to go onto that floor," Neville observed correctly.

Harry reiterated his earlier comment. "I told you, I got lost."

"Okay..." Neville finally accepted Harry's word. "But why do you think it's here in Hogwarts?"

Hermione and the Hufflepuffs glanced at each other and, by unspoken agreement Hermione filled the two boys in on what Harry had discovered. "... and so we think that Fluffy is guarding the Philosopher's Stone."

"And what about the unicorns you mentioned?" Ron noticed that Hermione had barely mentioned the creatures.

"We think that whoever is feeding off the unicorns is after the Philosopher's Stone," Harry informed him.

"Do you know who it is?" Ron could see the worry on the quartet's faces.

"No, but I think Harry has an idea as to who he is." Justin glanced at his friend as he spoke, having been able to see Harry's notes.

"Who is it then?" Neville asked impatiently.

"I think it's You-Know-Who," Harry announced, eliciting gasps of both horror and disbelief from both Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs alike. "Who else would be powerful enough to take down a unicorn, and who else would want the Philosopher's Stone?"

"You can't be serious." Ron was terrified by the thought.

"Very serious...." Harry's face backed up the force in his words, "...and I think he might be coming after me."

"But you don't know it's him for sure," Hermione reminded Harry. "You're just guessing."

George's voice suddenly interrupted them. "I couldn't help but spot you lot huddled up together. So what gives?"

The whole thread of thought was repeated for George, and for Fred, who was with his twin. George whistled at Harry's suspicion. "That's quite a leap from the unicorns to the Stone to You-Know-Who."

"I know but I can't logically think of anyone else so awful who could do something like this. I'd never have thought of him if it hadn't been for Luna mentioning in her letter that you have to be literally willing to give up your soul if you slay a unicorn." Harry defended his supposition. "And the Headmaster did say that he thinks that You-Know-Who isn't dead, and who else would be willing to go to those extremes?"

Susan had another horrible thought. "Do you think any of the teachers are helping him?"

The thought that a teacher might be helping Voldemort was almost as terrifying as the idea that the wizarding world's greatest nemesis might be back. Fred shivered. "I hope not. But you still can't be sure of any this. I mean you don't even know if it is the Stone that Fluffy is guarding."

Under the circumstances, Harry decided to come clean about his trip to Diagon Alley. "I promised the Headmaster I wouldn't say anything but when I went to Diagon Alley, Hagrid had fetched something up from the vaults for him. I'm only telling you now because I think it could have been the Stone."

No-one berated Harry for keeping the secret until then. "You think Hagrid is helping You-Know-Who?"

"Of course not." Harry thought Neville was mad to think that Hagrid would do anything so terrible. "He gave the Stone, if it was that he was collecting, to the Headmaster. If he was working with You-Know-Who, he would have kept it for himself."

"Perhaps he's just waiting until You-Know-Who is strong enough," Neville countered.

"Don't be daft, Neville." Justin also leapt to the large man's defense. "Hagrid would never do anything like that. If there is anyone in Hogwarts helping You-Know-Who it would be someone like Snape." Justin, like his friends, loathed the teacher who made Potions lessons a living hell.

"Actually the only teacher I saw at Diagon Alley was Quirrell," Harry revealed.

"Now that's stupid." Neville turned again on Harry. "He's a big wimp. There's no way he would have tried to break into Gringotts."

"I didn't say that it was him." Harry defended himself. "I just said that he was there. I actually agree with Justin. If any teacher is providing help, then I'd pick Snape." Harry was about to say that even though he thought that, he did not really believe that any teacher, including Snape, would really help Voldemort, when Ron started speaking.

"I agree with you." Ron then revealed something that he had thought nothing of at the time. "The day after Halloween I don't know if you noticed but Snape was limping, and I heard Filch ask him if he needed his dressing changing. What if Snape had tried to get into where the dog is being kept on Halloween when that troll got in, and it bit him?"

Susan interrupted excitedly. "What if he let the troll in?"

"I bet he did." With the newly discovered information that had been relayed to him about the Stone and Fluffy, Ron decided that Snape had to have tried to get the Stone. "Trolls are really stupid. It couldn't have gotten in on its own."

"So if Snape really did try to get the Stone, then he has to be working with You-Know-Who," Justin declared in a firm voice.

"We don't know that we're right about any of this," Hermione reminded Justin. "All we've done is to pick the most likely person."

"And I think you might be right." Susan, like Ron, was convinced that Snape and You-Know-Who were in cahoots.

"If it's true then what do we do now?" Harry asked.

"Watch Snape," Ron suggested.

"We could still be entirely wrong about everything," Hermione said again, not wanting to start something that could get them all into trouble.

"But Justin's suspicion about Snape could be right," Fred interjected. "And I agree with Ron that someone had to have let that troll in."

Ron agreed with his brother. "I think we should watch Snape carefully, and maybe keep checking the room with Fluffy in, just to make sure he's still there."

Neville believed that they should tell a teacher, and said as much. "I think we should tell someone."

Harry, who would usually be the first one to go to a teacher, shook his head this time. "No."

"But..." Neville began to protest.

Harry firmly overruled him. "Neville, we can't. George and I would get into trouble for going onto the third floor, and I'd be in big trouble for listening in on a conversation, as well as revealing the Headmaster's secret."

"You've seen the dog as well as Harry?" Ron asked his brother, as Harry's words sank in.

"Yeah," George admitted. "I was with Harry on the night of the duel he was supposed to have had with Malfoy. It was then we saw it."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Ron was more than a little annoyed that George had kept quiet.

"He told me." Fred grinned at Ron knowing it would annoy his younger brother.

"I only told you because you guessed something had happened," George reminded Fred of why he had spilled the beans. "And because you said you wouldn't tell anyone."

"Well, I still think we should..." Neville tried again to say that they should take the matter up with someone in authority.

Fred turned on Neville, not wanting his twin to get into trouble. "I suggest you don't even think about this in a teacher's presence, let

alone tell one. Not unless you want to end up on the business end of one of our pranks."

Neville had seen the twins in action far too often to want to mess with them. "It was only an idea."

"Keep it that way," Fred warned.

Hermione decided to step in before things got heated. "You don't have to threaten him. Neville wouldn't say anything anyway, would you?"

"No." Neville had little other choice except to agree. But inside he was fuming at Fred's heavy-handed treatment of him.

"Good." Fred's face was still full of threat.

Harry decided to redirect the conversation back to Snape. "Right, so we're agreed that we'll keep an eye on Snape, just in case."

"And we'll fly over the Forest," Fred suggested. "It won't seem suspicious if we say we're just practicing for our next quidditch game. Harry, you can do the same."

"I'll do some more research," Hermione decided. "You never know, we may have missed something."

"And Susan and I can help you." Justin did not really like research but he also did not want to be left out.

With everyone agreed on what to do, the group disbanded.

Later that night, sitting on his bed, Justin and Harry were taking turns to toss the snitch that Harry had won against Ravenclaw into the air and catch it. Justin could see that Harry was enjoying himself, so he decided to question Harry about his feelings for the game now that he had had some time to think about things after winning against Ravenclaw. "Harry?"

Not expecting Justin to say anything, Harry's attention wandered and the snitch shot almost out of his reach. Harry, however, jumped up and grabbed it before it could shoot off. "Yeah?"

"Do you really not like quidditch?" Justin asked, deciding to be blunt. "Because you look pretty happy right now trying to catch the snitch, and you looked even happier when you beat Ravenclaw."

Harry wanted to say that he did not care about it, but he knew he would be lying. Tossing the snitch towards Justin, Harry made a confession. "I loved playing in the match and winning."

"So will you try out next year?" Justin shot up and caught the snitch just as it threatened to double-back on itself and head back towards Harry.

"If you will," Harry said, watching Justin release the snitch again. "You're pretty good at catching that thing yourself."

"I don't think my flying is quite up to yours," Justin protested, as he yet again performed an almost impossible catch.

Harry had noticed how fast Justin's reactions were, but he was also aware that Justin's flying abilities were not quite as good as his. "I'll help you. With practice you could be really good." Harry was excited at the prospect and he looked hopefully at Justin. "So what do you think?"

Justin was unable to deny that the idea of playing quidditch appealed to him. "I'd like to try out but I don't want to go up against you."

"We need another reserve seeker." Harry thought Cedric was good but personally he felt that the boy would make a better chaser. "And it would free Cedric up to be the sole reserve for chaser."

Justin brought up a possibility that could happen. "And what happens if Cedric beats us to become seeker next year?"

"Then we cheer him on." Harry was not going to let a petty rivalry taint his newly discovered love of quidditch.

"Okay then." Justin popped the snitch into his drawer and closed it firmly on the little golden missile. "But I think we'd better get some sleep now though. Snape will have our guts for garters if we mess up again tomorrow."

"Don't remind me." Harry had recently spent several uncomfortable hours scrubbing out cauldrons by hand when Justin had added chopped elderflowers too early to their potion and it had exploded, showering him and Justin in blue goo. "Goodnight."

"Night, Harry." Justin called out.

Soon silence reigned over the room, and neither boy noticed when Wayne and Ernie came in to go to bed.

It was almost dark when Harry called an end to the final practice that he would be able to hold before Hufflepuff's match with Slytherin and the Easter holidays. Justin had volunteered to help, as had Ron. And up until Ron had to leave to finish his Charms homework, Harry had let the two boys take turns to use his broomstick, while he used a school broom. Now it was solely Justin versus Harry with Harry letting Justin use the better broom but with Harry still easily beating his roommate to the snitch. "I've finished for tonight. It's starting to get too dark to see properly. Let's head inside."

Justin was about to turn when he spotted a black shape heading into the Forbidden Forest. "Harry, look at that."

By the time Harry had turned to look at where Justin was pointing, the shape had merged into the darkness of the Forest. "What?"

"I thought I saw someone or something heading into the Forest," Justin explained.

"Do you think it was Snape?" Harry and his friends had been unable to find anything to suggest that the unpleasant Potions Master was aiding Voldemort or anyone else to find the Stone.

"I just saw a black shape." Justin was unable to say for definite that it was Snape.

"I'm going to fly over the Forest," Harry decided. "Before it gets really dark."

"Then I'm coming with you." Justin followed Harry as his friend led the way.

Once over the top of the Forest looking down, it was almost impossible to see what was inside but Harry suddenly spotted a movement, and he realized that the shape was indeed a man. Not saying anything, he pointed downwards, letting Justin know that he had located their prey.

Justin was about to follow Harry when suddenly Harry's broomstick began to buck and sway. "Harry, hold on."

"I can't." Not wearing his usual gloves, Harry's fingers were slipping off the school broomstick, which had been polished to an unusually high degree.

"I'm coming to get you." Justin flew towards Harry.

Harry screamed out as Justin's own broomstick began to waver. "Get back."

"But you'll fall." Justin had, however, had the good sense to withdraw.

"Get help!" Harry yelled, before he finally relinquished his grip on his broomstick, bounced on the canopy of the tree beneath him, and then disappeared from Justin's sight into the darkness below.

Torn between going to help his friend or rushing back to the school, Justin did as Harry had asked and headed back towards the school, tucked low over Harry's Nimbus 2000 as he tried to garner as much speed from it as he could.

On the ground, Harry lay winded for a moment. Then, hearing a rustling sound, he quickly rolled over and dove into a bush to his left. Unfortunately for Harry it was a prickly bush but he managed to keep quiet, even though what felt like a million small sharp pinpricks had pierced his skin. The figure the two boys had spotted walked briskly into the area where Harry was hiding, and Harry held his breath, trying to keep as quiet as possible.

As for the man who had caused Harry to lose his fight to stay on his broomstick, he knew that Harry had come down somewhere close but he could see no sign of the meddlesome boy. Aiming his wand in the general direction of where he believed Harry to be, the man called out in a low, rasping voice, "Accio Harry Potter."

Harry fortunately had almost immediately figured out what was going to happen, and he had hurriedly wrapped his arms and legs around the thick central post of the bush, forcing the needles deeper into his skin and almost making him cry out. Harry desperately held on as the spell hit him, and it seemed to Harry as if his arms were going to be ripped out of his sockets as he clung urgently to the bush. Suddenly the pulling motion ended, and Harry was able to relax as the figure moved his wand away from Harry and in a circular action. Harry made sure to hold on tight once again as the figure completed his circle but this time the pull was not as forceful. And Harry sagged in relief when the unknown man gave up.

The man then cast a spell Harry could not hear properly, and before long, into the moonlit clearing, there came a pure white beast. At the sight of it, Harry's relief turned to horror, and he wanted to scream out to the unicorn to run but fear clogged his throat. As he watched, the creature stepped closer to the black cloaked figure, before it finally knelt down and lowered its head, its horn almost touching the ground. The black cloaked man then also sank to his knees, and, aware of what was about to happen to the ethereal creature, Harry finally found his voice. "NO!"

The spell was immediately broken, and the unicorn shook itself as it rose to its feet and then ran out of the clearing. The man whom Harry had thwarted turned around to face the bush that Harry's cry had come from. "Potter, I know you're in there."

Harry stayed silent hoping that the figure would leave him alone if he believed that he had gotten Harry's location wrong. Harry's prayers sadly went unanswered as the figure cast yet another summoning spell. This one, however, was far more powerful than the previous one, and despite his best efforts, Harry was torn out of the prickly bush, landing at the feet of the spell caster, who smiled to himself inside his cloaked hood. "Potter, how nice of you to join me."

"You're... you're..." Harry could barely get his words out, his teeth were chattering so hard with fear.

"I'm what?" The voice remained low and raspy but this time it was definitely tinged with amusement.

"Him!" Harry managed to get out.

"That's quite a stunning revelation. I'm him!" The voice had become mocking, before barking out an order. "Get to your feet, boy."

Harry's legs refused to obey, and he remained in a heap on the floor. The man shook his head. "It's so sad that the supposed savior of the wizarding world is a coward who is going to die at my feet."

Harry suddenly felt angry at the man's slur, and he struggled to his feet, his wand in his hand. "I'm not going to die at your feet!"

"No, boy, instead you're going to die standing up." The man then began to withdraw his wand, and although he badly wanted to close his eyes and start singing, Harry instead opened his mouth to try to stun the man in front of him, just as his attacker began to speak.

However, his attacker did not get any further than the word 'Avada' when the bushes burst apart, and a golden haired creature leapt into the clearing. With leaves and dirt flying everywhere, Harry closed his eyes to protect them, and by the time he reopened them, it was to find that both the dark-cloaked figure and the golden haired creature had gone, and that he was now alone in the clearing.

His legs shaking, Harry turned to leave, although he was not entirely sure of which direction to go. He jumped when, after leaving the clearing, a voice interrupted his ponderings. "You are the child of prophecy, are you not?"

Harry looked around trying to locate the owner of the voice. As he did so, the same gold colored creature that had entered the clearing moved into the moonlight. Harry immediately recognized him as being a centaur but because he had had his eyes closed, he had no idea that this centaur had saved his life. "Sorry, Sir. But I don't understand."

"My name is Firenze, man child." The blonde haired centaur introduced himself, but he did not explain his first comment.

"I'm Harry Potter," Harry returned the courtesy, before making a hopeful request. "Can you tell me how to get back to Hogwarts?"

"It is in yonder direction." The centaur pointed the way. "I will guide you."

The pair of them had not gone far when a thundering sound of hooves became apparent, and a voice that was full of authority demanded that they stop. "Firenze, get away from the accursed one."

"Me?" Harry's voice came out in a squeak when he suddenly found himself surrounded by five large centaurs, and he backed closer to Firenze.

"Be silent, young one." Firenze hushed Harry up. "Bane, this is the human child prophesied to lead us to salvation."

"It does not matter who he is supposed to be. His hands are awash with blood," the large black centaur responded. "He is not welcome here. These lands are sacred."

Harry swallowed hard and wondered what the centaur meant by his comment about the blood. Harry said nothing, however, and Firenze moved to stand in front of him. "The stars say..."

"I too can read them," the black centaur snapped. "But either he leaves or dies. There will be no second chances."

Harry was by now starting to get very frightened, even more so than he had been earlier, and he felt relieved when Firenze placed a hand on his shoulder in a protective gesture. "Then I will lead him away from our lands."

"You are too soft," the opposing centaur growled.

"I merely seek to protect what is ours," Firenze responded in placatory tone. "And I believe that making sure that the child of prophecy has left the Forest will best achieve that."

"I..." Bane got no further when yet another centaur joined the group.

This centaur's body was covered in red hair. "Firenze, take the boy and go."

Harry was surprised when Bane said nothing further, and he smiled briefly at the new arrival, but wisely said nothing.

Firenze then spoke to Harry again. "Come, man child."

Harry followed Firenze, his heart beating fast, aware they were being watched by the large centaurs. He was glad when Firenze spoke to him again. "You can relax now."

Harry let out the breath he been unaware he had been holding. "Thank you."

"You are almost safe." Firenze could see the edge of the Forest. "And it looks as though you will have an escort."

Harry's eyes were not as used to the dark as his companion's, and he had to struggle to see what he meant. Harry's legs again became wobbly when he recognized the Headmaster, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Flitwick just about to enter the Forest. "Over here!" Harry's voice sounded tinny to him as he called out.

A bright light appeared, the result of a spell being cast by Albus, and Harry turned to the centaur. "Thank you, Sir."

"Be safe, Harry Potter. And keep out of this Forest," Firenze warned. He did not stop to speak to the teachers, and instead he turned and headed back into the Forest.

"Mr. Potter, you're covered in blood." Filius was puffing a little when he spoke, the result of having run most of the way to try and keep up with Albus and Minerva, both of whom had walked a great deal quicker than one would have expected at their ages.

"It's from a bush," Harry hurriedly explained. "I hid in it but it was rather prickly."

"Hid from what, Harry?" Albus waved his wand over Harry before lowering it again.

"From someone." Harry felt silly now that he had to explain who he thought he had seen.

"I think we should get Mr. Potter cleaned up and checked over by Madam Pomfrey," Minerva said firmly, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Then we can question him."

Half an hour after leaving the Forest, Harry had showered, changed into pajamas, and was now tucked up in a private room in the hospital wing. "Thanks, Madam Pomfrey."

Madam Pomfrey took the empty mug that had contained hot chocolate away from Harry. "I'm going to keep you here overnight but there's nothing much wrong with you except for a slightly elevated blood pressure. No doubt a result of your experience in the Forest."

"Probably." Harry had half-expected to die, so Madam Pomfrey's comment rang true.

Harry had barely lain back against the pillows when Minerva and Albus came into his room. "Hello."

"I see that Madam Pomfrey has taken good care of you." Albus noted that Harry's numerous pinpricks of blood had vanished, together with any evidence of the bush.

"She has, Sir," Harry agreed with the Headmaster. "I suppose you want to talk about what happened."

"I do," Albus confirmed. "So start at the beginning."

Still feeling a little embarrassed, Harry explained exactly why he and Justin had flown over the Forest, and the upshot of their actions. He finished sounding more than a little sheepish, "...and I really don't know what might have happened if Firenze hadn't rescued me and shown me the way back."

"I am surprised he did so. There are more centaurs like Bane than there are like Firenze." Albus stroked his beard as he thought. "But Firenze is known to Hagrid, and he is more tolerant of humans than the others."

"He was nice." Harry had been a little taken aback by the centaur but he most definitely had not been as rude or as frightening as the large dark centaur Bane had been. And Bane's words had caused Harry some worry, and he therefore had several questions about what the centaur had said. "Sir, what did Bane mean when he said that my hands were blood soaked and that I was the accursed one?"

Did he mean that I killed my parents, and that I'm a bad person because of it?"

"I do not know but I believe so," Albus confirmed Harry's theory before continuing. "But as I said before, you are not to blame for any of their deaths, no matter what Bane told you. And you are not a bad person."

"Sir, they almost seemed frightened of me." Despite his fear at the time, Harry had observed that the centaurs with Bane had not met Harry's eyes, all four of them standing behind their apparent leader. "Well, except for Firenze and whoever the other centaur was."

Albus guessed that it had to have been Magorian, the leader of the centaurs, but he did not mention this to Harry, nor did he comment on Harry's observation. "Well, I'm glad that you had at least one friend in the Forest, a forest you shouldn't have gone into no matter what you believed was happening," Albus' expression became stern. "Which leads me to the subject of Professor Snape and the Philosopher's Stone."

Minerva joined in with the conversation. "Harry, you were correct in believing that the Stone is hidden in the school. But you can rest assured that it is safe, and that Professor Snape is one of those teachers who is helping to keep it that way."

"But..." Harry began to protest.

"Harry, just because you dislike someone, or you dislike their methods of teaching..." Albus stopped to take a breath, "...does not mean that they are evil or aiding Voldemort's spirit."

Harry still thought that Snape was evil, no matter what Albus said. "So who do you think was in the Forest tonight? Do you think it was You-Know-Who?"

Albus shook his head. "I do not. You would not have survived long enough for Firenze to save you."

"Then do you think he was helping You-Know-Who?" Harry asked, remembering that he had more or less accused the cloaked man of being You-Know-Who.

"I'm afraid I have no idea," Albus admitted to his ignorance of who it could have been. "But he may have been. So in future you will steer clear of the Forest, you will not follow Professor Snape or anyone else around, and under no circumstances will you attempt to discover where the Stone is being held. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Sir." Although he had a strange urge to tell Albus, not wanting to get his friends into trouble, Harry refrained from mentioning that he already had an idea of where the Stone was being held.

"Good." Albus stood up. "I'm glad to see that you survived your ordeal, but in future please try and refrain from meddling in matters that do not concern you."

"Yes, Sir," Harry repeated. "Sorry, Sir."

"Don't dwell on it," Albus responded gently, seeing how pale Harry had become again. "And try to get some sleep."

"But do you think that whatever is in the Forest will come after me?" Harry was not willing to let Albus leave without finding out what the Headmaster thought.

"I cannot say no because I do not know what they want or what they are thinking." Albus' words were far from reassuring. "But I will do everything I can to keep you safe."

"Thank you, Sir." Harry gave a little shiver as he recalled what had happened, before bidding the Headmaster goodnight.

"We will discuss this during our Wednesday night chat, Mr. Potter." Minerva's formal tone left Harry in no doubt that she was angry with him for what he had done. "And you will also serve a detention with me prior to that for leaving the grounds without permission. The same goes for Mr. Finch-Fletchley."

Harry drooped visibly but he did not argue, and as he had with the Headmaster, he bid his guardian goodnight before lying back on his pillows and trying to get some sleep.

Easter

Harry had said goodbye to his friends a few hours earlier, and now he was both excited and nervous as he waited together with Professor McGonagall for Remus Lupin at the gates of Hogwarts. A sharp crack signaled the man's arrival, and Harry found himself smiling a little shyly at him. "Hello."

"Harry." Remus smiled at Harry before he turned to Minerva. "I'll deliver Harry to the Express in time to return to school."

"If you need anything, owl me," Minerva said, and then she hugged Harry before heading back towards the school.

Remus held out his arm. "Are you ready to go?"

"Are we apparating?" Harry asked, a little nervous at the idea.

Remus lowered his arm. "Yes. Just take a deep breath for me when I say ready."

Harry reached out and grasped Remus' arm. "Okay."

Remus wrapped his hand around Harry's to secure him. "Ready."

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes, and then there was a horrible squashing sensation. When he opened his eyes again, he found himself in a sitting room. "Is this your house?"

Remus nodded. "Yes. But I'm never here very often."

A house-elf appeared, and Remus introduced it. "Harry, this is Macclesby. If you need anything, call out to him. Macclesby, I'll show Harry to his room."

Only once the house-elf had vanished, did Harry question Remus. "Remus, what was that?"

"A house-elf," Remus said as he led Harry up a corridor. "He takes care of the house for me." He stopped when he came to the last door at the end of a corridor. "This is your room."

Harry found himself in a light blue room with a large wooden bed in the middle of it with matching white and blue bedding. A nightstand and dresser completed the ensemble of furniture. "It's nice."

"I had it decorated for you," Remus told him as he walked over to one of the other two doors. "There's a shower and toilet in here, and the other door leads to a closet where you can hang your clothes."

Harry took out his shrunken trunk from his pocket and placed it on the floor. "Can you please unshrink this for me?"

"I can do better than that," Remus said as he flicked his wand at the trunk. A few moments later, Harry's clothes flew out of the trunk and into the closet, his underwear into the dresser, and his books and homework flew to sit on top of the dresser.

Harry grinned. "That was brilliant."

"Just a simple house-keeping spell," Remus explained, as he led Harry out of the room and back towards the sitting room. "I only acquired Macclesby a few years ago, and so up until then I've had to take care of myself."

On arriving back in the sitting room, Harry found that Macclesby had placed sandwiches and glasses of milk on a small table in between two chairs. "Is that for us?"

Remus nodded. "I told Macclesby to get it ready before I left to collect you. Now please sit down, Harry. We need to talk."

Next Chapter: Remus opens Harry's eyes.

Note: Some changes in this chapter from the original, plus an additional section. It will likely be 2-3 days before the next chapter is posted as it is almost completely new material, and I'm still working on it.

Chapter 14: Revealing the Truth

Nod to the Big Bang Theory in this chapter. And to Cranky Don - no, no, no were-squirrels!

Harry could tell from Remus' expression that whatever he had to say was serious. "Am I in trouble?"

"No," Remus said immediately. "But I want to talk more about your childhood as I got the impression from your letters that you weren't happy growing up."

Harry tensed up. "It was okay."

Remus knelt down in front of Harry. "Harry, I have to be honest. It's more than just your letters. I spoke to Molly Weasley a few days ago. She overheard a conversation between you and Charlie, and when I told her I was concerned, while she wouldn't tell me what she had overheard, she did tell me that you and your relatives have a bad relationship."

Harry decided to be honest with Remus. "We do. The Dursleys hate me."

"I wish I could have done more to help," Remus said, taking Harry's hand.

Out of nowhere, Harry felt a flicker of anger that this man, who had purported to have been his dad's best friend, had simply sat back and let him suffer, and he tugged his hand free. "So why didn't you?"

"As I told you at Christmas, Dumbledore preferred to keep you hidden." Remus said, settling down to sit by Harry's feet on the carpet. "I did try to find you time and time again but I initially came up empty." Aware that Harry was listening intently, Remus went on. "I tracked down over forty-six Harry, Harold, Harrison, and Henry Potters of your age, and none of them were you."

"But I went to school and everything," Harry said, pointing out the loophole in Remus' statement.

"The education system was the first place I checked when you came of school age," Remus told him. "But it was only in the last few years that I was finally able to locate you."

"Then why didn't you visit me?" Harry asked, more than a little annoyed that Remus had found him in the end and had still not visited him.

"I did but after doing so, I decided that Dumbledore had been right to leave you with your relatives," Remus reluctantly admitted. He ran a hand over his face. "I had better explain how I found you first of all before I explain why I left you there."

Harry picked up his milk, his throat suddenly feeling dry. After taking a sip, he looked pointedly at Remus. "Okay."

Remus grabbed a sandwich, and he took a bite of it before he went on. "You were hidden well by Dumbledore, and your records were sealed. It was the Head of the Unspeakables who finally helped me to locate you."

"Unspeakables?" Harry queried the term.

"A branch of the Ministry that is a sort of undercover detective division, a bit like Auror Division, but it has more powers than BritAD," Remus said, a little confusingly. "I'll explain more later."

Harry was rather intrigued by the Unspeakables, but he decided he could wait to hear about them. "So when exactly did you find me?"

"About fifteen months before you were due to join Hogwarts," Remus said. "Ignotus, he's the head of the Unspeakables, finally had some information come his way about a strange happening at a Muggle school – it was actually just a chance mention of a teacher claiming to have had her hair turned blue by a pupil - and he asked me to check it out."

Harry came to the only conclusion he could. "Are you an Unspeakable?"

Remus had cleared it with Ignotus to talk to Harry about himself and so he nodded. "Yes, and before we continue talking, I'll need you to swear an oath."

Harry had never sworn an oath before but wanting to hear what Remus had to say, he agreed readily to Remus' condition. "Okay, but I don't know how."

Remus therefore instructed him on what to say and do, and Harry did it.

Harry was a little surprised when Remus also took an oath. "Why did you do that?"

"It's actually a sort of safety feature," Remus explained. "My swearing that you would only fall into a deep sleep from which only an Unspeakable can wake you is a safeguard. If I didn't do it and you tried to tell anyone about what I've told you or what I'm about to tell you, either on purpose or by mistake, you'd die."

Harry paled a little. "I'm glad you did it then."

"I don't want to hurt you, Harry," Remus hurriedly assured Harry, before going on. "Getting back to what I was discussing. After some digging, I discovered that a boy named Sheldon Cooper was a pupil in the blue haired teacher's class, and that the teacher thought that there was strange about him. From there, it didn't take much to discover that Sheldon was the ward of a couple named Petunia and Vernon Dursley. Of course I knew that Petunia had married someone named Vernon Dursley and so I followed the lead up, which led me to you."

Having picked up and bitten into a sandwich during Remus' oratory, Harry had been unable to interrupt Remus with his mouth full, but he did now that he had swallowed. "But when the register was called out for class, the teacher always said 'Harry Potter', and I always put my name on things."

"It's a witness protection protocol spell," Remus explained. "The spell would have been placed on you and not your teacher, making you see and hear one thing, but in reality you'd have been doing another."

Harry was dumbfounded. "So I was writing my name as 'Sheldon Cooper' even though I thought I was writing my real name?"

Remus nodded. "Yes, and just like you, your aunt and her family would have had the same spell placed on them."

"Is the spell still on me?" Harry asked.

Remus waved his wand over Harry. "The spell is currently dormant, and I believe it's tied into the wards of Privet Drive. Once you arrive home, the spell will probably kick in again, and it will once again come to an end by the time you return to Hogwarts."

"Shouldn't the spell have worn off then when I went to junior school?" Harry asked.

"The spell takes time to fade, and as you were going home every night, it was renewed. It's a tricky protocol spell but it can be done," Remus said, as he held out his hand. "I'd like to see your wand if I may."

Harry wanted to know why first. "What for?"

Remus was unsurprised that Harry was being so suspicious. "To make sure everything is in order. As you may know, there's an underage tracking spell on it, but I also want to check it for anything else, especially given the protocol spell on you."

Harry therefore handed it over, and Remus tapped it, making it glow pink, before it subsequently turned green, yellow, and then finally red. "Why did it do that?"

Remus scowled. "Because it has several spells on it. The red signifies the under-age tracking spell, which, like the protocol spell, I'm not going to remove."

As Remus had suspected, Harry knew all about the under-age tracking spell, and he was a little disappointed that Remus was not going to remove it. "What about the others?"

"The pink is a loyalty spell," Remus said, his voice terse. "Aperium Vultus."

Harry watched in both shock and amazement as a pink smoky figure flew out of the end of his wand. "That's Professor Dumbledore." Harry's shock grew as another person came out: Professor

McGonagall. Then the pink glow ended leaving the smoky figures hanging in mid-air. Harry looked at Remus. "What does it mean?"

"It means that you've had a spell placed on your wand to ensure your loyalty to those two people," Remus told him, and then he tapped Harry's wand. "Reprobaem Fidelitas."

The two figures shot back inside of the wand. "What did you just do?"

"If anyone should check your wand, it will glow pink and show Dumbledore and McGonagall as it should, but the loyalty spell has now been taken off," Remus explained. "The yellow was a tracking spell, which, for the time being, I won't be removing for safety reasons, and..."

Harry interrupted him. "Who put a tracking spell on my wand?"

Remus could not tell exactly, but he hazarded a guess. "I'd say Dumbledore."

This made Harry think. "I wondered how he knew exactly where I was going to come out from the Forbidden Forest."

Remus hesitated in his work. "You went into the Forbidden Forest?"

Harry reddened. "Yeah. I thought Snape was up to no good and so I followed him."

"Would you mind telling me about it?" Remus asked. When Harry baulked, Remus encouraged him. "You don't have to go into detail. I just want to know what happened in general."

And so Harry told him in outline what had happened. "...and I told Dumbledore everything about what had happened and about Snape. But even though I wanted to tell him, I hid that my friends knew about the Stone, as I didn't want to get them into trouble, but it was weird, I really wanted to tell him."

"Don't worry, I won't be going to Dumbledore to tell him what you've told me," Remus promised, as he thought about what Harry had said. "And the reason you wanted to tell him is because there's an honesty spell on your wand." Remus tapped Harry's wand and said

a final spell. "There. It's gone, although again it will look as though it's still on the wand."

"Was the honesty spell tied up into loyalty spell?" Harry asked, feeling more than a little sick that he might have spilled his guts to Dumbledore because of a spell.

Remus nodded. "I'm afraid so. It would have made you feel inclined to tell Dumbledore whatever he wanted to know, just as you did after the Forest encounter." Remus then placed several more spells on the wand, before handing it back to Harry. "I know you're probably uncertain as to who you can trust and so I believe it's time for another oath. I, Remus John Lupin, swear on my life and my magic that whatever I tell you today will be the truth, and that I will always endeavor to be as honest as possible with you as I can in the future."

Harry appreciated Remus' oath, but he was still far from happy with the man, and he decided to use the oath that Remus had just sworn to his own advantage. "In that case, I want to know why you left me with the Dursleys after finding me."

"I thought you were happy," Remus admitted, having truly believed it.

Harry knew that if Remus was lying, he would have died, and so he had to accept the answer, but that did not stop him from continuing to question Remus. "So how did you know I was happy?"

"After I located you, I tracked you down to Privet Drive, and using an invisibility spell, I watched you leaving the house with the Dursleys and another boy. You looked excited, and I could hear remarks about going to the zoo. But, wanting to make sure that my impression was correct, I apparated to the zoo to await your arrival. When you got there, I could see you all getting ice-creams from a woman at the gate, and you looked happy, and so I left," Remus explained.

Harry sighed. "My uncle had threatened to spank me if I so much as put a toe out of line. It was Dudley's early birthday treat and there was no-one else to look after me. I was excited because I had never been included in an outing before, and I looked happy because the woman selling the ice-creams included me. The Dursleys couldn't

say anything without looking stupid but I had to miss dinner that night."

Remus apologized. "I'm sorry, but you did all look happy."

Harry was well aware of how they had looked: a happy family just like the one he had seen in the Mirror of Erised, only this one had been a lie. Harry wondered if Remus' observation had been based on just that one time. "And did you ever check again?"

"I did. I went back a few weeks later, on the day of your birthday," Remus said. "You were lying on the grass in the back garden with a big ginger cat on your stomach, singing softly to yourself. Then I heard your aunt call out that it was lunchtime, and you went inside."

"They never let me eat lunch with them," Harry revealed. "She was calling me to prepare it for them, and I sing when I'm upset or frightened, but this time I was actually singing to the cat. He'd only stay with me if I sang to him, and I sort of considered him a friend."

Remus experienced a pang of guilt. "I should have known better than to rely on more than just a few sightings."

"So you only checked twice?" Harry asked, still not quite willing to let Remus off the hook.

"I paid three more visits," Remus said. "Once, when you were eating dinner with your family, and another couple and what I presumed was their children."

"When else?"

"A few months later, and you were weeding in the garden, humming to yourself," Remus said, having almost revealed himself to Harry at the time but changing his mind at the last second; a decision he now regretted. "And the last visit was in the May before you turned eleven. You were walking up the road, carrying a shopping bag, talking to a woman I didn't recognize. I could see your cousin also carrying a bag, and of course I assumed all was well, particularly as you looked happy."

Harry could hardly believe it. "You managed to visit on the only times when I was not being picked on. The dinner you saw was for a

man who wanted to work with Uncle Vernon, and it was for appearances that I was allowed to join them, and the woman you saw with the shopping bags was Mrs. Green. She used to give me money for helping her with her shopping after school. Occasionally Dudley muscled in because he wanted the money. But normally it was just me and her. She was probably the only person who was ever really nice to me." Harry did not include Mrs. Figg, a batty cat loving neighbor, who usually looked after him when the Dursleys wanted to be shot him. Harry also felt as though she did not really like him, and only put up with him because Petunia had paid her to do so.

"And the weeding?" Remus asked.

"That was a punishment," Harry said. "Everyone else had gone out and I was locked outside and had to tend to the garden. But I was just glad that I was on my own."

Remus had had similar punishments himself growing up. "That doesn't sound so bad."

Harry knew then that Remus had no idea how bad things had been for him. "That was one of my nicer punishments. The other things they did were much worse."

"Such as, Harry?" Remus asked, Molly not having gone into specifics, and Harry's earlier mention of a spanking, and now the weeding, not really causing any major alarm in Remus.

With Remus' oath about telling the truth still ringing in Harry's ears, Harry decided to be just as honest in return, and he began to talk about everything that the Dursleys had done to him, ending up with the shoe incident, although unlike as with Dumbledore, this time Harry revealed the shoe that Petunia had spanked him with had had a heel. "I think that's about it."

Now fully aware of what Harry had gone through, Remus dropped his head into his hands in both shame and guilt. "James would kill me if he was still alive."

When Remus did not keel over and die as a result of his oath to tell the truth, Harry realized that Remus truly thought that his dad would have hurt his friend. "I don't think he would have killed you."

Remus gave a bitter laugh. "When you were born, I promised him that I'd protect you and Jamie, and even though I could do nothing to help Jamie, I could have helped you, and I failed."

"Um, who's Jamie?" Harry asked in confusion.

Remus sighed heavily in dismay. "You don't even know about your brother?"

Harry swallowed hard. "Brother?"

"Harry, you weren't alone that night Vol... You..." Remus got no further as Harry interrupted.

"You were going to say Voldemort," Harry said, watching surprise at his own use of Voldemort's name ripple across Remus' face.

"It's his name, well of sorts," Remus said, before holding up his hand before Harry could again interrupt. "We'll talk more about him later. We've got a lot to get through." When Harry's mouth closed, Remus resumed his earlier oratory, this time using the name that made most people shudder. "Voldemort attacked not only you, but your parents and brother as well. Jamie's body was never found but it's believed he was killed in the backlash of whatever spell destroyed Voldemort's body."

Harry felt a tiny glimmer of hope. "So Jamie might still be out there!"

"I'm afraid not, Harry, as we believe that Voldemort had a failsafe," Remus revealed. "Something terrible he did that an innocent such as Jamie wouldn't have had."

"So why did I survive?" Harry asked. "I would have been an in..."

Remus wondered why Harry had trailed off. "What's wrong?"

"What if I wasn't an innocent and that's why I survived?" Harry asked, recalling Bane's words.

Remus was alarmed that Harry would think such a thing. "Harry, you were just a baby..."

Harry broke in, and revealed some of the detail he had left out. "But Bane said I had blood on my hands, and I was accursed. When I asked Dumbledore if it was because my parents had died because of me, he said maybe."

Remus could see Harry was getting worked up, and he immediately tried to allay Harry's fears. "Centaur's have a strange way of putting things, and they shouldn't always be taken too literally."

"So Dumbledore wasn't right?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Remus had to answer truthfully. "No-one really knows how a centaur thinks."

Harry put Remus on the spot. "What do you think?"

Remus was reluctant to answer truthfully, but given his oath, he had little choice. "If I had to try and work out what they meant about you, not being able to think of anything else they could have meant, unfortunately I'd have to say the same as Dumbledore." He watched Harry's face fall. "Harry, even though I think that, it doesn't mean that I think you were responsible for your family's deaths. I'm just telling how I think the centaurs might have taken it. As far as I'm concerned, Voldemort was mostly guilty of their demise, as he's the one who killed them."

Rather than acknowledging that he had nothing to do with it, Harry responded by bringing up something that Firenze had said. "There was something else. Firenze said I was the child of prophecy. Did that mean anything?"

This time Remus had to admit that it did. "Yes. There's a prophecy about you and Voldemort that one day will have to be fulfilled."

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"I'll show you in a few days' time," Remus promised. "I have a few things I need to get sorted before I do so."

"I want to know now," Harry said forcefully.

"I don't know the prophecy word for word, just the gist of it," Remus said. "I'll take you as soon as I can to view it but as I've just said, there are some things I have to do first."

Aware that Remus was being honest, Harry backed off and changed the subject. "So is it something to do with the prophecy that I have to live with my relatives?"

"Yes," Remus said. "Voldemort went after you because of the prophecy. And because of that, Lily ended up defending you, bringing into existence the blood wards that surround Privet Drive and help keep you safe."

"So it's my fault that she and everyone else died then," Harry said logically.

Remus took Harry's hand and this time Harry let it remain in Remus' grip. "Harry, did you make prophecy?"

"No, but.."

Remus did not let Harry continue. "Did you tell Voldemort where to find your family?"

"No." Harry's voice was slightly sulky as he realized what Remus was doing. "But..."

Again, Remus stopped Harry from offering up an excuse. "Did you bring down the wards protecting the cottage?"

"No."

"And did you cast the killing curse on your family?"

"No." With his final answer, Harry managed to get an argument in. "But it was because of me that Voldemort killed my family."

Remus had one final question, which he knew would embarrass Harry, but he still asked it. "So, Harry, did you ask your parents to make love and bring you into the world so that a prophecy could exist about you?"

Harry went horribly red, and he hurriedly shook his head. "No."

"Then you're responsible for nothing," Remus told him. "You can't keep taking the blame for something that isn't your fault. And just so we're clear on what I mean by that, I'll set it out for you: the fact you were brought into the world and a prophecy was made about you isn't your fault; what happened to your family isn't your fault; what happened when you were growing up isn't your fault; and what Dumbledore did isn't your fault."

Harry thought for a moment before slowly nodding. "Okay, if it's not my fault, then it's also not your fault that my relatives hurt me."

Remus, however, was not quite so willing to accept absolution. "Harry, I should have checked more closely, so I am partly to blame for some of what happened to you at the Dursleys, and I know James would blame me."

"Okay, so you should have checked more closely," Harry agreed. "But it wasn't your fault that you chose times to check on me when everything seemed okay. You didn't place me there, Dumbledore did. It's his fault, and if Dad was still alive I bet he'd agree, and that he'd want to kill him before he killed you."

Remus still believed that James would have killed him if he had been able to do so, and no doubt the Dursleys, Dumbledore, and McGonagall as well for their parts in the fiasco. His friend had always had a mellow nature, but he had also been ultra protective of his family, and Remus suspected quite rightly that James would have killed for them if necessary. "We'll have to agree to disagree about me, but I believe you're right about Dumbledore. And I think you could add the Dursleys to the list, as..."

Harry broke in to express dismay before Remus could add another name. "I wish I didn't have to go back to them."

Remus felt yet another pang of guilt. "I could apologize again, but I know that nothing I can say is going to take away what you had to suffer. But I am going to petition the Court to have you removed from the Dursleys' care, blood wards or no."

"But you said they protect me," Harry reminded Remus of what he had already stated.

"They haven't done a good job so far," Remus remarked. "Harry, as what's happened to you proves, blood wards are not infallible, and it's not just your family who could harm you despite their existence."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean?"

Remus set it out in clear language. "By virtue of his blood, Dudley Dursley was part of the wards and he could invite in whomever he liked, and they would be allowed to bully and hurt you. The same goes for your aunt, and by extension, your uncle. Once inside the wards, they could have killed you without a problem. And so the same goes for Voldemort. If your aunt or cousin were to invite him in, Voldemort could kill you without any retribution upon him." Seeing Harry's frightened look, Remus felt bad about what he was about to say but it needed saying. "And although the protocol spell is in place, there's still a chance that Voldemort, if he ever manages to return, might track you down. I did, although it took some time, and in some respects, you'd be better moving from place to place, and this is one of the things I will bring up when I go to court."

Harry shifted uncomfortably as he realized how little protection the blood wards had actually offered. "What happens if the Court says no to my leaving the Dursleys?"

Remus had to be honest. "Then you'll have to go back, but either way, I have something for you." Remus slid a ring off his finger. "This is my personal portkey for this house, but I'm going to give it you. The activation code is your first name, your dad's first name, and my last name."

"You used our names?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Yes," Remus said. "The three names aren't something that are likely to be said together by mistake."

Harry slipped the ring onto his finger. "What happens if I lose the ring?"

"Only you or I can take it off or see it," Remus told him. "And as I've said, it will bring you here. If I'm not here, then Macclesby will know where to find me."

Remus' comment brought Harry back to his earlier mention of being an Unspeakable. "Do you mean if you're doing stuff as an Unspeakable?"

Remus nodded. "Yes. My work occasionally takes me out of the country."

Harry recalled Christmas. "Is that why you couldn't stay at Christmas?"

"Yes."

"And does Mr. Weasley know you're an Unspeakable?" Harry asked.

"He's one of the few people I trust, and as head of the Muggle Misuse office, he is privy to a great deal of useful information," Remus admitted. "It was the tip he passed on to Ignotus that led me to you."

Harry recalled that Remus had said he would talk more about Unspeakables, and this seemed as good a time as any, so Harry asked a question. "How did you get to be an Unspeakable?"

"Sometimes Unspeakables are Aurors who stand out, but I was actually working as a private detective and doing small amounts of work for the Ministry when Ignotus called me in," Remus explained. "He said that it had been noted that I had managed to find out things others couldn't, and he was impressed by my methods. He then offered me a position as an Unspeakable. We talked for some time, and then I agreed to think about it. Two days later I accepted."

"So is an Unspeakable the same as an Auror?"

Remus shook his head. "No. Our powers are far more ranging, and we have a license to do things that Aurors do not."

"Like what?"

Remus gave a few examples. "We can hold a suspect indefinitely without recourse to legal advice if we have enough evidence to do so, we can use spells far more ranging than the standard Auror, and we can use any method we like to get information."

Harry shivered. "Have you ever killed anyone?"

Remus now half-regretted his promise to be honest. "Yes, I have, Harry, but purely in self defense."

This made Harry feel a little better but not much, and so he decided to steer the conversation towards a less disturbing topic. "So do you all know who each other are?"

"We don't," Remus said. "A few of us, who work in teams, know who their partner is, but generally not. And anyone you know could be an Unspeakable; we all have jobs that hide what we really are."

It suddenly occurred to Harry that what Remus was telling him was something most adults would have kept hidden. "So why are you telling me all this? I know you wouldn't tell most people, particularly a kid."

"I wouldn't," Remus admitted. "But as much as I hate to say it, Harry, you're the Boy Who Lived, and you're an exception. And as you'll find out when you view the prophecy, I believe there's a lot riding on your shoulders, and you're going to need someone you can trust implicitly, and so..."

"I trust my friends," Harry interjected.

"You can't trust any of them, Harry," Remus warned.

"But they're my friends," Harry protested. "And..."

Remus interrupted. "Harry, I would have once laid down my life for all three of my best friends. I trusted them that much, but one of them eventually betrayed us all."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"You had a godfather, Sirius Black," Remus said, his face clouding over. "He was not only once my best friend, but he was also your parents' secret-keeper, and he betrayed them to Voldemort, allowing Voldemort to kill your family. So, as I said, you can't trust any of your friends, Harry."

Harry now understood Remus' comment about trusting no-one, although he wanted to protest that his friends would never do something like Sirius Black had done. Instead he made a confession. "It's a little bit late for a warning. I've already told three of them about the tunnel from Hufflepuff."

"Then I'll be paying a visit to those friends," Remus told him. "Who are they?"

"Hermione Granger, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and Susan Bones," Harry said, watching a grimace cross Remus' face at the mention of Susan. "What's up?"

"Amelia Bones and I don't exactly see eye to eye," Remus revealed, although he knew it would be Amelia he would have to approach for a hearing for Harry. "And if anyone was under Dumbledore's thumb it would be Susan."

"How do we check?" Harry asked.

"You don't. I do," Remus said, and he got to his feet. "Do you know your friends' plans for Easter?"

Harry nodded. "Yes."

"Then I'll be paying them a visit in a few days' time." Remus checked the time, and he decided it was time for a change in subject. "We've got quite a while before dinner. Would you like to go out and see a movie?"

"You know about movies?" Harry asked in surprise.

"My best friend was married to a Muggle-born," Remus reminded Harry. "But I'm pretty au fait with the Muggle world due to my job. So do you want to go?"

Harry shook his head. "Not really. I'd actually like to know more about my family."

"Would you like to see some memories of your family?" Remus offered.

"Memories?" Harry asked.

Remus nodded. "As an Unspeakable, I have access to a small pensieve, which is a storage device for memories. I can extract my memories and share them with you."

"Do only Unspeakables have them?" Harry asked.

"No, some well off individuals also own them," Remus said. "James had one, as does Dumbledore."

"How do you know that?"

"All pensieves have to be registered," Remus explained. "They're not illegal but they are a Class C item, which means that the owner has to register it with the Ministry."

"Does anyone else I know own one?" Harry asked in curiosity, wondering exactly how many people were able to afford one.

"Black did, the Malfoys do," Remus said, trying to think who Harry might know. "Amelia Bones has one as part of her position, McGonagall has..."

Harry interrupted. "She has one?"

"If memory serves, it's a twenty memory version, but yes, she has one," Remus confirmed.

Harry's lips tightened. "She listened to me going on about my parents and how much I wish I'd known what they were like but she never once offered to show me a memory of them, and she didn't tell me about Jamie." Harry was more than a little angry and he decided that after what he had learnt about the loyalty spell and what she could have done for him, that he wanted nothing to do with Minerva anymore. "Can I get her changed as my guardian?"

Remus grimaced. "Unfortunately once upon a time, we all trusted Dumbledore, and James and Lily were no exception. They made him the executor of their wills, and he therefore can choose your guardian for you. I can petition the Court for a change in guardianship on the grounds that she left you on a doorstep, but I have the feeling that it will fail."

"She left me on a doorstep?" Harry asked in horror.

"After you lost your family, you were left on your relatives' doorstep by McGonagall, Dumbledore, and Hagrid." Remus relayed what Hagrid had told him one night when Remus had bumped into Hagrid in the pub and had unintentionally gotten him drunk. "You were toddling by then and could have wandered off and been hurt, and they still left you."

Harry suddenly felt as though his world was coming down around his ears. "So I can't trust Hagrid either?"

"Hagrid isn't a bad person," Remus said in defense of the giant man. "He's just fiercely loyal to Dumbledore because of something Dumbledore did for him when he was just a boy, and he's not exactly bright. It would never have occurred to him to question what Dumbledore was doing, and he cried buckets of tears when he was telling me about it. He said he begged for you not to be left there, but Dumbledore said it was for the best, and so Hagrid went along with it."

"So Hagrid knew where I lived?" Harry asked, having mixed emotions towards the giant of a man.

When Hagrid had spilled the beans, Remus had pressed for information about Harry's whereabouts but Hagrid had been unable to tell him, having had Harry's actual location obliviated, although he could still remember the events of the evening. "No. He was unable to remember that, although he could remember what happened to you and how upset he felt about it."

Harry really liked Hagrid, and given that giant man had tried to stop Dumbledore, and that he had been upset over leaving Harry, Harry decided to forgive him. But he could not do the same for his guardian. "But McGonagall would have known what she was doing, wouldn't she? And I bet she knew where I lived."

"I don't know for certain," Remus said. "But given that she's Dumbledore's closest friend and companion, I would say so."

"Then I definitely want her removed as my guardian," Harry said, filled with resentment that the teacher had likely left him to rot at his relatives.

"If you do it, then McGonagall and Dumbledore will both know that you're aware of what happened to you," Remus warned.

"Good!" Harry bit out. "Then I won't have to worry about playing nice."

Remus smiled. "You're so like Lily when you're angry."

"Really?" Harry asked.

"Definitely," Remus said, and he walked over to the wall, which he tapped and cast several spells upon. A piece of wall slid back and Remus reached inside the nook and took out a small bowl. "This is a twenty memory bowl. I have one at work that is much bigger, but this is much more portable should I need to take it anywhere."

Harry was shocked when Remus touched his wand to his head and pulled out what looked a little like something gooey from a Ghostbusters movie. "What is that?"

"A memory," Remus said, as he pulled several more out. "This first is just after you were born, and then I have your parents' wedding, your christening, and one of the pranks we played on Slughorn, who was our Potions Master at the time. You can then decide what else you might like to see."

Harry knew almost straightaway what memory he wanted to see. "Can I see me being sick on Dad?"

Remus laughed and withdrew the memory, before holding out his hand. "Just a warning, the memories will seem real but you won't be able to touch anyone."

Desperate to see something of his family, Harry took Remus' hand, and the two became immersed in the pensieve.

The rest of the day was subsequently spent viewing memory after memory that Remus possessed of Harry's parents and brother. By the end of the day, Harry was emotionally exhausted, and after tiredly eating dinner, he fell into bed and soon dropped off to sleep. However, it was less than a few hours later when he awoke screaming, and he looked up to find Remus was standing by his

bedside. "Bad dream," Harry managed to get out, his voice shaking with the horror of what he had just witnessed in his nightmares.

Remus gathered the shaking boy into his arms and held him against him. "I had a feeling this would happen after showing you those memories."

Although he was dry-eyed, Harry shuddered against Remus' chest, his nightmares still very much at the forefront of his mind. "It wasn't my parents or Voldemort that I was dreaming about. I saw people dying everywhere, and a dark-haired man was laughing, and then he was covered in blood and screaming before he exploded in flames."

Remus hazarded a guess. "I think that Bane's words must have been playing on your mind. Do you want me to stay with you?"

Totally unnerved by his graphic nightmares, Harry nodded. "Please."

"I'll be back in a moment," Remus said, and he apparated out of the bedroom.

Harry jumped when a small bed appeared at the foot of his own bed, followed by Remus. He noticed that the bed was just wide enough to fit between his bed and the dresser. "You can sleep here. I can sleep there."

Remus shook his head. "I'm used to sleeping pretty much anywhere. Lie down and try to get some sleep. We'll talk again in the morning."

Next Chapter: Harry discovers more about Remus and his endeavors. Harry meets Amelia Bones and pays a visit to the Dursleys.

Chapter 15: The Retribution Spell

When Harry awoke it was daylight and the sun was trying to peek around the dark blue curtains that were holding it back. And as he sat up, he noticed that Remus' bed had vanished as had Remus. Harry hurriedly got up and got ready.

Remus was waiting for Harry at the dining table. "Macclesby has cooked breakfast. There's also cereal."

Harry had grown rather fond of cooked breakfast while at Hogwarts and so he helped himself to the hot option. When he had finished, Harry leant back in his chair. "Remus, I have some more questions."

Remus put down the newspaper he was reading. "Fire away."

"If you knew Aunt Petunia had married Uncle Vernon, why didn't you check there when I first vanished?" Harry asked, having been thinking about things in the shower.

"Because I didn't know then she was married to Dursley, and I had no idea how to start searching," Remus said.

"But you're a detective," Harry pointed out. "And an Unspeakable."

"Back then I was neither," Remus told him. "And as I have something else to tell you about me, I think we'll start with a little bit of background information first. Although my Dad was a Muggleborn, he didn't have much to do with the Muggle world once he married my mother, a pure-blood witch, hence my not really having much idea as to how to function in it when I was searching for you."

"You couldn't ask your dad?" Harry interjected.

Remus gave a sad smile. "Dad died when I was fourteen from a massive heart attack, just after I had returned to Hogwarts from summer break. When I left Hogwarts at the end of my fourth year, I had to go and live with Mum and her new husband until I was old enough to get my own place."

"Your mum married someone new that quick?" The words came out of Harry's mouth before he could stop himself, but Remus did not seem bothered by Harry's nosiness.

"No. My parents were already divorced when Dad died. Mum couldn't take the stress of taking care of me and so she left when I was eight," Remus said, the memory of his crying mother leaving being one of the worst moments of his life.

"You were sick?" Harry asked.

Remus hoped that Harry would not freak out when he told him. "I'm a werewolf, Harry."

Just like Justin, Harry was fascinated that mythical creatures really did exist, and he surprised Remus with his comment. "That's seriously wicked."

"Not really," Remus said in a sad voice. "I change just once a month on a full moon, and it hurts like nothing I can describe. My bones rearrange themselves, I grow fur all over my body, and if I didn't take Wolfsbane, a sort of calming potion for werewolves, I'd rip you apart if I came across you."

Harry changed his mind. "That doesn't sound so nice."

"It's not," Remus confirmed. "And Mum couldn't bear to be around me suffering like that when I was growing up, and, after Dad died, it's also why I left her home as soon as I could once I had finished at Hogwarts. We hardly see each other anymore, as she still has problems dealing with what I am."

"I'm sorry I thought it was cool," Harry said apologetically, now feeling a little guilty.

Remus gave Harry a gentle smile. "You didn't know, Harry, so don't feel bad."

Harry did though, and he wanted Remus to know he was okay with what he had been told. "I'm sorry that your mum didn't like it but I'm cool..." Harry changed his wording. "...I mean okay with it."

Remus gave a grateful smile this time. "Thank you. And although I can't describe a werewolf as being cool, it does have its advantages."

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "You just said it's horrible."

"It is," Remus acknowledged. "But the change only happens once a month. However, I retain the werewolf's abilities in my human form."

"I know you can't mean you attack people," Harry said.

"I could actually hurt someone very badly at any time of the month," Remus told him. "I'm very, very strong, and I could rip someone apart with my bare hands if it came down to it."

Harry's stomach lurched a little nervously. "But you haven't, have you?"

Remus was unsurprised that Harry had asked, given that Remus had admitted to killing people the night before. "No." He then moved on. "However, it's not just strength I possess. I can also move very quickly, and I have excellent day and night vision as well as highly attuned hearing. I can also sense what you're feeling or if you're lying."

Harry gave an uncomfortable grimace. "So you know what I'm feeling all of the time?"

Remus shook his head. "I can actually tune people's feelings out. It would get very frustrating if I could sense what everyone was feeling every moment of the day."

Harry was rather relieved to hear it, but he did comment on the usefulness of the ability. "It must help you in your job."

"It does," Remus agreed, having made use of his somewhat unique ability on more than one occasion. "Do you have any more questions about it?"

Harry thought for a moment, before shaking his head. "Not right now."

"Then I'll get back to your first question. When you were first taken, I only knew that Lily had a sister named Petunia Evans," Remus said. "Due to Petunia's hatred of anything magical, the two of them hadn't spoken since Lily's sixth year, when Petunia had moved away from Leeds, where they once lived. Unfortunately, even though Lily had

taken all of us to the movies and to the Muggle shops on more than one occasion, I still had no idea at the time how to track someone down in the Muggle world, and the only person I would have trusted enough to ask help me find you was dead by then."

Harry had been told about Peter Pettigrew the previous evening. "So you had to learn as you went along?"

"Correct," Remus confirmed. "After three months, I managed to find out that when she had moved out of her parents' home, Petunia Evans had taken a flat in Manchester. However, when I checked out the address, I discovered that she hadn't lived there for over three years, and the new renter thought that she had gotten married and moved down south. But they couldn't give me a name."

"So what did you do?"

"I gave up on Petunia having no idea how to go about finding her, but I kept looking for you."

"Where?"

Remus had lost count of the places he had searched, but he briefly summed them up for Harry. "The first thing I did was to go to the Magical Hall of Records to check on magical adoptions, as I suspected that maybe Dumbledore had placed you on the register under a false name but there had been no recent adoptions, although I did check on every adoption that came up for three years. And so, suspecting that maybe he had hidden you in the Muggle world, I moved on to checking out Muggle orphanages, both here and abroad. And, as I told you yesterday, when you reached school age, I started looking for you in the educational system."

Harry guessed it must have been expensive. "So how did you afford it?"

"I dropped out of wizarding university a few weeks after the attack and..."

Harry broke in, a little confused. "But wouldn't you have already left by then?"

"Normally, I would have, if I had taken the standard three year advanced courses," Remus said. "But first of all I took an accelerated two year course in languages, and I was into my second year of Advanced Magical History and Defense Against the Dark Arts, when you were attacked."

Harry wondered why a detective would take history. "Did you finish the courses, and why history?"

"I did eventually finish, and teaching history was going to be my chosen career, although by the time I had finished taking the courses my idea of teaching was long gone by then," Remus said, unable to imagine being a teacher now. "I had decided that I enjoyed being a detective."

"So how did you decide to become a detective?" Harry asked, wondering how someone went from wanting to be a teacher to ending up as a detective.

"To find you I used what I had left of the money my parents had set aside for university," Remus said. "Obviously though, it eventually ran out, and that's when I started doing odd jobs, as well as the odd piece of detective work while I searched for you. Things grew from there."

As Harry mulled this over, he realized something. "You said yesterday you knew Aunt Petunia was a Dursley when you went to my school, but you said just now you couldn't find her, so you must have somehow found out that she'd married Uncle Vernon before you found me."

Remus smiled at Harry. "You have your mother's brains as well as her temper."

As with the previous night, Harry liked being compared to his mother. "So how did you find Aunt Petunia?"

"First of all I found Vernon," Remus told Harry. "You would have been about four when I took on a part-time job acting as a messenger for a company called Ionic Tooling. And one of the places I delivered to on a regular basis was Grunnings..."

"That's where Uncle Vernon works," Harry broke in.

"It is, and it was just a coincidence that I was making a delivery when Petunia came in with a chubby blonde haired child, and, so, after chatting up the receptionist for information, I found out that one of the shop managers, Vernon Dursley, was married to her, and that Dudley was their son. Of course I asked about any other children, and the receptionist said that they definitely only had one kid. And so I decided to wait until Vernon had left, and..."

Harry interrupted again. "Why?"

"Because, given what the receptionist had said, even though I didn't really believe you were living with the Dursleys, I feared that if I was wrong, Dumbledore might have given them some sort of portkey if anyone came looking for you, and so I was trying to circumvent them panicking and using it, if that turned out to be the case," Remus explained.

Harry knew it would never have occurred to him. "So what did you do after Uncle Vernon left?"

"Petunia and Dudley actually left with Vernon, and so I followed them in my delivery van," Remus said. "I lost them though when I got to a road called Hawthorne Drive, but I could feel wards surrounding the area..."

Once more, Harry interrupted. "What do you mean by feel wards? I know what they are but not that you can feel them."

"When you were living at Privet Drive did you ever experience a sensation almost like a buzzing in your ears and a need to sneeze?" Remus asked.

Harry immediately nodded. "Yeah, but I just put it down to the electricity pylons that were built nearby."

Remus gave a smile. "That was actually the wards that surrounded you."

"So if they surrounded me, wouldn't that tell everyone that someone magical lived there?" Harry asked.

"The wards would only have let anyone in who had no wish to harm you, and only wizards can sense them," Remus said. "And as most wizarding households have some sort of wards surrounding their homes, no-one would have known it was you."

Satisfied, Harry urged Remus to go on, and so, picking up from where he had broken off, Remus continued. "I suspected that the Dursleys had to be living somewhere close by, and I was trying to figure out where to go next when a woman came up to me and asked if I was lost. I told her I was looking for a couple named the Dursleys. Of course she was suspicious, and back then I didn't dare do something like use the Imperius curse on her to make her tell me what I wanted to know, so I improvised and told her that I used to go to school with Petunia and was looking for her as I'd heard she'd moved into the area with her husband and three children."

"Three children?"

"I wanted to see if she corrected me, which she did, but not as I expected," Remus said. "She told me that I must have the wrong Petunia as although she was married, she only had one child. When I asked if she was certain, she said yes, as she often babysat for Petunia. And so I assumed that you weren't living your relatives after all."

"But you said yesterday that Hagrid had told you I'd been left on my relatives' doorstep," Harry reminded Remus. "And you said you knew the wards were blood wards."

Remus caught the hurt in Harry's voice. "I only realized it was your relatives' doorstep you had been left on after I found you at the school. When Hagrid told me about leaving you, he was unable to remember whose doorstep Dumbledore had left you on or where it was. As for the wards, at the time, I was unable to determine what sort of wards were in place, just that they existed. It's only since I received training as Unspeakable that I've been able to determine the difference."

"Okay. But since there were wards in place when you first found Aunt Petunia, why didn't you check on the area again when you found out about Hagrid's story?" Harry asked, his hurt still very much evident in the slightly whiny tone of his voice.

Remus sighed. "Because, after taking into consideration my own sighting of the Dursleys without you, the receptionist's confirmation of just one child, the babysitter's comments, and Petunia's abhorrence of magic, I came to the incorrect conclusion that the wards were there to protect the Dursleys and not to hide you."

"Why protect the Dursleys?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Although your mother's parents, your grandparents, died before Voldemort attacked you, your great-grandfather was still alive," Remus said, his face turning grave. "But he was murdered several nights after Voldemort's defeat. He'd been tortured first, and it was obvious that someone had managed to obtain his address before your records were sealed."

"So my great-grandfather also died because of me," Harry said, Remus' reasoning about the wards only being there to protect the Dursleys making sense now.

Remus shook his head. "Your great-grandfather died because either the Ministry or Dumbledore didn't move fast enough to protect him."

Not wishing to dwell on another death that had happened because of him, Harry moved on. "So you found out nothing more about me until you heard about the blue haired teacher?"

"I came across lots of dead-end leads but nothing concrete," Remus acknowledged. "I wish I had persisted with the Dursleys but I truly had no reason to suspect that you were living with them. I should have delved deeper, and again, I can only say I'm sorry I didn't."

Harry shrugged. "It's okay. I'd probably have done the same thing as well."

"I doubt it," Remus said, his guilt beginning to get to him again, despite the fact that most people would have come to the same conclusion as he had. "If I had just searched the area and tracked them down, things could have been so much different for you."

"At least you're going to tell on the Dursleys now," Harry said, hoping that Remus might be able to prevent him from having to return by approaching the Court as he had promised he would the previous night.

"I am," Remus said, before he frowned. "But I still can't figure out why no-one knew about you."

"Perhaps Aunt Petunia only ever told Mrs. Figg about me," Harry suggested. "She used to babysit me."

"Arabella Figg?"

Harry nodded with surprise. "How did you know?"

"She used to teach Muggle Studies at Hogwarts but she left in 1985," Remus told Harry, as he began to think things through, given this new piece of evidence. "You say the Dursleys usually left you with her?"

"Yes."

"Dumbledore must have drafted her in after she had left Hogwarts," Remus decided. "But when I ran across the Dursleys it was term time and Figg would still have been at Hogwarts, so it makes me wonder what the Dursleys did with you, especially as no-one knew you existed, and you couldn't have been with Figg."

Harry could see from Remus' face that he had likely already drawn a conclusion, as had Harry. "You think they left me in my cupboard, don't you?"

"I do, and if it proves to be true, then it all adds to fuel for the court case," Remus said, getting to his feet. "In fact, I think it's time we paid a visit to the Ministry. Go wash your hands and meet me back here."

The Ministry of Magic

Amelia Bones was surprised to be paid a visit by Remus Lupin, someone she considered to be a two-bit detective and a nuisance, and Harry Potter, but she told her assistant, Daniel, that she would see them, even without an appointment. When they were led in, she got up from her desk. "Mr. Lupin, Mr. Potter."

After Remus had done so, Harry also shook hands with Susan's aunt. "Hello."

Amelia moved back around her desk and sat down, indicating that Harry and Remus should do the same. "What can I do for you?"

Harry sat quietly as Remus outlined what they had come in for until Amelia turned her attention to Harry. "Mr. Potter, I need to hear from you that the allegations are correct."

A little nervously, Harry nodded. "They are."

"In that case, I'll need to see evidence to back up your claim," Amelia told him, and she got up and left the room. When she returned, she had a pensieve that was much larger than the one owned by Remus. "This is a pensieve, Mr. Potter, and I'm going to need to extract your memories of some of the purported events and place them inside the pensieve to view them."

Harry disliked the strange tickling sensation, but he did as Amelia asked and remained still and thought about his relatives while she made the extractions, and soon his memories had been deposited in the pensieve. All three of them then entered the pensieve, and Harry had to spend an uncomfortable hour watching his aunt and uncle punish him. He was grateful for Remus' hand on his shoulder as he watched the memories. Amelia was scowling by the time she withdrew. "Based on Mr. Potter's memories, I believe that there is more than enough evidence to pursue an action against the Dursleys, as well as rescinding their partial guardianship of Mr. Potter. Wait here."

This time when Amelia returned, she had a smaller pensieve in her hand, and she was being flanked by six black uniformed men and women. "I'm going to pay a visit to the Dursleys. Mr. Potter, I would prefer it if you would accompany me."

"Only if Remus goes as well," Harry said, noticing that Amelia had not included Remus in her invitation.

"Of course," Amelia said, and she handed over a bookmark and tapped it with her wand. "A portkey will take us to the nearest emergence point."

Remus halted her. "Before we leave, I'm afraid there's more I need to tell you." After drawing Amelia away from the group of Aurors and

asking her to erect a privacy bubble, Remus then told her about Harry's wand and what he had discovered had been in place on it.

Amelia debated the issue for a moment, before making a decision. "Let's deal with the Dursleys first."

After Amelia had briefed the contingent of Aurors and Harry on what she wanted, the group left via portkey, and Harry discovered that he disliked the swirling motion of the portkey, being sick to his stomach as he arrived. He was grateful for Remus' presence as he was cleaned and freshened up. "Sorry, I've never travelled like that before."

"That's quite alright, Mr. Potter," Amelia said, although it had been to Remus that Harry had been apologizing. "Can you point us in the direction of your home?"

Harry began to lead the way. "It's just up to the left and down the street."

Privet Drive

Petunia opened the front door and immediately recoiled at the sight of the lone boy standing there, everyone else having adopted invisibility spells to see how Petunia reacted. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd drop by," Harry repeated what he had been instructed to by Amelia.

"I told Dumbledore I would take you for two weeks at the start of summer, so you can go back to him and your freaky world until then," Petunia snarled at Harry.

"What's he doing here?" Dudley's voice came from behind Harry, almost echoing his mother's words.

Harry swung around to find Dudley and three of his friends standing there. "I came to visit."

Petunia slammed shut her front door, leaving Harry alone to face Dudley. "Got any money, Potter?"

Harry wondered then if the witness protection spell was working once again, and if Dudley was really calling him 'Cooper' and not 'Potter'. Harry came out of his musings as Dudley pushed him backwards. "I said, have you got any money?"

Harry shook his head. "No."

"Then how are you going to pay us to get by?" Dudley's rat-like friend, Piers Polkiss asked.

"I'm not," Harry answered in the negative, although he was well aware of what would happen next by doing so, having lived it more than once before.

As Harry suspected he would, Piers punched him in the stomach, and as Harry dropped, Dudley got a kick in, catching Harry in the groin and making Harry scream out. As Harry collapsed completely he noticed several things happening at once: Dudley dropped to the floor beside him, cupping himself and screaming just as loudly as Harry, and then yelling 'get him'; from inside the house came a blood chilling agonizing scream; and an angry looking Remus shimmered into existence and covered the space between himself and the three boys who were moving to attack Harry.

A loud bang stopped everyone in their tracks. Amelia had also materialized and she had been the one to let off the explosive spell. "Anger won't solve anything, Mr. Lupin. Step away from the boys and let my men deal with them."

Remus took several deep breaths to reign in his anger, and he then knelt down by Harry, who was crying from the pain. "Preoccupus Inguen."

Harry took several deep breaths of his own as the pain in his groin receded. "My stomach still hurts."

Remus repeated the spell but on Harry's stomach this time. He then scooped him up. "I'm taking him to St. Mungo's."

"I don't think..." Amelia began.

Remus began walking. "I don't care what you think. Harry needs medical attention."

It was less than twenty minutes later when Amelia tracked Remus and Harry down at the hospital. Harry was sleeping but Remus got to his feet as Amelia entered the room and she began to tell him what had happened. "The Dursley boy and father are also in here being treated. It appears that someone had placed a retribution spell on the house. Vernon Dursley is in extremely bad shape as the spell damage inflicted on him is far greater than that Dudley Dursley received."

Remus shrugged. "I don't care if he dies."

"That may well happen. The healers are operating on him now." She stared suspiciously at Remus. "Did you cast the spell?"

Remus shook his head. "No. I suspect Dumbledore probably did."

"I need your oath," Amelia said, still not quite believing Remus despite what she knew about Albus. She withdrew her wand. "Please."

Remus slowly withdrew his wand, careful not to make any sudden movements as he did not want Amelia having an excuse to open fire on him. "I, Remus John Lupin, solemnly swear that I did not cast a retribution spell on the Dursleys."

Amelia lowered her wand. "Very well. Petunia Dursley is being kept here and I need to extract some of her memories for additional evidence but I will return shortly."

Amelia left and headed for the room that was serving as a holding cell and where Dudley was being treated. On arrival she forcibly removed the required memories from Petunia. After reviewing them, it was enough for Amelia to decide to prosecute the entire family. "You will both be held at the Ministry of Magic until your trial."

Petunia put an arm around a sobbing Dudley, who had come around a few minutes earlier. "You can't do this. He's just a boy."

"So is Harry Potter," Amelia said. "And yet in that last memory I viewed, you had locked him in a cupboard while you went out on a company outing with your husband and son. Mr. Potter could have died if there had been a fire."

Petunia fell silent, unable to deny what Amelia had said. She instead turned her back on Amelia to comfort her son.

Amelia was well aware that Petunia was unable to leave, and so she headed back to Harry's room, to find he was coming out of the sedated sleep the healers had put him under while they had healed his injuries. "I've viewed Petunia Dursley's memories and I'm going to arrange to have both her and her son removed to the Ministry holding cells once Dudley Dursley is fully recovered."

"Did you find out what she had done with Harry when she went out?" Remus asked.

"You were correct in your suspicions," Amelia told him, "and..."

"I'm going to kill her," Remus snarled, interrupting Amelia.

Amelia put a stop to Remus' rant. "As I said earlier, anger will not solve anything, Mr. Lupin. The Dursleys will be tried in front of the Wizengamot, and they will answer for their actions there."

"But Dumbledore placed Harry with the Dursleys," Remus pointed out a flaw in Amelia's plan. "And he's head of the Wizengamot."

"I will ask that Tiberius Ogden or, should he not be available, then another senior member of the Wizengamot, preside over the Interrogators and remaining Wizengamot for this hearing," Amelia said, although she hoped Ogden could take the case as she was well aware that the elderly wizard would be unlikely to be swayed by anything Dumbledore would say. "And I have arranged for Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall to both be brought in and questioned. I will therefore set up an emergency hearing of the Wizengamot to be held after the Easter holiday weekend."

"Harry is staying with me until he returns to school, and I will therefore be attending court with him," Remus said.

Amelia shook her head. "Under the circumstances, with all of Mr. Potter's guardians being brought into the Ministry for questioning, I'm afraid that Mr. Potter will need to be made a ward of court and a temporary guardian found for him."

"I want to stay with Remus," Harry said in a shaky voice.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, Mr. Potter," Amelia told Harry, her dislike of Remus coming through in her voice with her next comment. "Given his anger issues, I do not consider Mr. Lupin to be a suitable temporary guardian for you."

Before Harry could protest again, Remus suggested someone she might. "What about the Weasleys?"

Being friends with Arthur Weasley, and given his capacity as a head of department, Amelia agreed to Remus' suggestion. "I will take him to the Weasleys when he is released from here if Child Services agree with your suggestion." She then looked pointedly at the door. "I will take over watching Mr. Potter until his healer comes in."

Remus could see how upset Harry was, but he decided not to make things worse by arguing. "Harry, everything will be okay. I'll drop by and see you tomorrow."

Harry reached up and hugged Remus as Remus bent over him. His voice showed his dismay when he spoke. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

"I'll send Macclesby with clothes for you," Remus promised, hugging Harry back before releasing him. "Don't get worrying." He then stiffly nodded at Amelia and headed out of the room.

The Next Day

Remus apparated outside of the Burrow and knocked on the door, to be let in by Molly. "Remus, come in."

Remus was pleased to see that Harry was looking relaxed as he got up, but he knew he was about to change that. "Everything okay, Harry?"

"It's great," Harry said, smiling at Remus, but seeing how grave Remus was looking, his smile faltered. "What's up?"

"It's your uncle," Remus said, his voice gentling as he delivered the bad news. "He didn't make it. The damage caused by the retribution

spell literally caused his groin to explode, and although the healers initially stopped the bleeding, it started up again and he died."

Harry was more than a little stunned. "But when Amelia took me to the Ministry she never said anything."

"Amelia?" Remus interrupted.

"She told me to call her that," Harry said.

"What time was that at?" Remus asked.

"About five o'clock," Harry said, after thinking for a few moments.

"Your uncle died late last night, so she wouldn't have known then," Remus said. "But I'm surprised no-one has told you yet."

Suddenly, as if it had heard him, an owl began tapping at the window. Molly hurried over and opened the window. "Arthur, it's addressed to you."

Arthur took the letter while Molly handed over a tidbit to the owl and it took wing. "It's from Amelia telling me about Harry's uncle, and, as one of his temporary guardians, she's asked me to tell him."

"Has Child Services made you Harry's permanent guardians yet?" Remus asked, half expecting it to happen.

Arthur shook his head. "No. The final decision rests with the Wizengamot."

Remus frowned. "The Wizengamot are voting on Harry's guardianship? I thought Child Services would deal with it."

Molly sighed. "Didn't Amelia tell you that it has been decided that Harry is a special case?"

Remus angrily shook his head. "No. The bloody woman refused to see me this morning. I had to use my position to find out that Harry was definitely here, and..."

"Remus, not now," Arthur said, interrupting Remus before he could get into his stride, and he led a pale faced Harry to sit down. "I know you don't see eye to eye with Amelia, but..."

"But she deliberately cut me out of the loop, and I'm the one who filed the complaint," Remus broke back in, his voice reflecting the anger he was still feeling.

"She has Harry listed in that capacity," Molly told him.

Remus now became even angrier. "Is she mad? Doesn't she realize how difficult it will be for Harry to stand up to his aunt now that his uncle has died and make a decision if the Wizengamot refers to him?"

Harry finally said something. "Um, what are you talking about?"

Remus sat down by Harry. "The Wizengamot is like a Muggle court and is presided over by the Chief Warlock, who is Dumbledore. But, as you heard yesterday, Bones will arrange for someone else to take his place to hear your case. I expected to be the one who represented the prosecuting side, but Bones has listed you instead, which means that if the Wizengamot defer to you as to their chosen punishment for your aunt, you might have to make a decision as to whether to go along with it or not."

Harry was unable to see why that was so awful. "How is that bad?"

"Because they could ask you to make a decision on whether to administer the Kiss or to simply lock up your aunt forever," Remus informed him.

"What's the Kiss?" Harry asked.

"Azkaban, our wizarding prison, is guarded by Dementors as I told you when you viewed memories of Sirius Black," Remus said, ignoring Molly's scandalized look. "After Sirius was locked up, a new law was brought into effect. Obviously it was too late to apply it to him, but as from then, if someone did something considered so terrible as to be unforgivable, then a Dementor would be brought in to suck out their soul, and they would then be returned to their families a mindless shell, or, if their family decided that they didn't

want them, then the prisoner would be pushed through a doorway into what is believed to be a non-existence."

Harry felt more than a little sick at the idea. "And I could be asked if I wanted that for my aunt?"

"Yes," Remus said softly, able to feel Harry's disgust. "It could come to that."

"Do you really think it will go that far?" Arthur asked, although he suspected that Remus was right.

Remus nodded. "Given that Harry's the Boy Who Lived, I believe that the Wizengamot will be harsher than usual."

Harry had a question for Remus. "If it was you, what would you do?"

"I wouldn't waste the cell in Azkaban," Remus said, leaving Harry in no doubt as to what he would have requested.

Although Harry hated his aunt, he was unsure if he could be so callous. "I don't know if I could do that. And what about Dudley?"

"I'm sure it wouldn't happen to Dudley," Molly reassured Harry. "He would likely be placed with a relative."

"He's only got an aunt," Harry pointed out.

"And you provided memories of her mistreatment of you as well," Remus reminded Harry. "She may well also come under fire and be considered an unsuitable guardian for Dudley."

"So what will happen to him?" Harry asked.

Nudging Arthur away from Harry, Molly sat down on the other side of Harry as Remus explained. "If he's not prosecuted, he'll likely be sent to a children's home, but as I've just said, the Wizengamot will likely make a recommendation to you, and you may well have to decide what will happen to him."

Feeling overwhelmed, Harry shifted closer to Molly, needing the comfort. "Will you be there?"

"As your proposed guardian, I will," Molly said, placing an arm around Harry. "So don't get worrying."

Harry, however, spent all night doing little else. His problems were far from at an end though. Having informed Amelia of what spells Dumbledore had placed on Harry's wand, the responsibility of checking Harry's friends' wands was taken out of Remus' hands. However, Remus had managed to muscle in to view the various checks in his capacity as an Unspeakable, and Amelia had been unable to refuse the request of Ignotus, the head of Unspeakables, that two of his men also attend given the importance of the matter.

When Remus returned to the Burrow to report on Amelia's findings, Harry was a little disheartened to discover that the Headmaster had not only tampered with his wand, but some of his friends as well. Harry thought Remus looked awful. "Do you feel okay?"

Remus answered Harry honestly. "Not really, it was a full moon last night, and I had to be at the Ministry at ten to go out with Bones and her team." He sat down next to Harry. "How are you doing today?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm okay, I guess. All this is a bit much." He looked again at Remus' white face. "You really do look bad, Remus."

"I'm just very tired and extremely sore," Remus said, and he tried to stop Harry worrying. "It's nothing I haven't had to deal with before."

"But it's something you shouldn't have to deal with." Molly came waddling in with a cup of steaming potion. "Drink this, Remus. I've been tinkering with it to try and improve it."

Harry looked at the cup with interest. "What is it?"

"An old family recipe pick-me-up," Molly said as Remus began to slowly drink the potion. "I've been trying different variations of it on Remus ever since I discovered he was a werewolf. This is my latest version."

As he finished the potion, Remus gave a sigh as some of his aches and pains vanished. "That's probably the best one yet. Thanks, Molly."

Molly beamed. "I'm just glad to be able to help." She then fished in her pocket and withdrew a vial of potion. "Pepper-up."

Remus took the second potion and shook himself as steam came out of his ears. "That's better. Now, down to business. I'm going to start with your younger friends first. Justin Finch-Fletchley had both honesty and loyalty spells on his wand binding him to Dumbledore, and a loyalty spell to you. Hermione Granger had the same. However, Neville Longbottom was clean. Unfortunately Ron's wand had honesty spells to both Dumbledore and McGonagall on it, and again a loyalty spell to Harry." Ron was spending the holidays with Neville and both boys' wands had been checked at the same time. "Susan Bones' wand was also untouched. I have a feeling that Amelia would have already cast a spell on it to prevent any tampering."

"And Luna?" Harry asked, having had to supply a list of everyone he considered a friend.

"She's in the clear as we suspected she would be, and so is Ginny." Given what had happened, Molly had asked Xenophilius Lovegood to look after Ginny until everything was sorted with Harry.

"And the twins?" Arthur asked, aware that Amelia had also gone to see them at their friend Lee's home, wanting to cover every possibility.

"Fred was clean," Remus said, but he knew his next words would not make the Weasleys happy. "But George had a loyalty spell to Harry on an object in his possession, as well as honesty and loyalty spells to Dumbledore and McGonagall."

As he suspected, Molly was far from pleased. "What object?"

Remus threw down a large piece of parchment. "This. It's a map of Hogwarts, and it shows not only its environs, but who is where in the building."

Harry picked it up. "But it's blank."

Arthur, however, made a different observation. "I'm surprised Amelia let you take evidence."

Remus gave a brief but meaningful smile. "She didn't. I substituted a blank piece of parchment in its place."

"Don't you think stealing evidence is wrong, even for an Unspeakable?" Molly asked, her lips pursed.

"Normally yes, but there was no way I was leaving something this important in her hands, especially as it might end up being disposed of at the end of the trial," Remus said as he tapped the parchment with his wand. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

The parchment became animated in front of Harry's eyes, and he gasped when he saw Filch's name and footprints to indicate where he was, as well as a second set of much smaller footprints and the name 'Mrs. Norris' trailing right behind Filch. "That's brilliant."

Remus smiled. "I know."

Arthur knew that look. "You've seen this before, haven't you?"

"I actually made it, together with help from my friends." Remus tapped the parchment again. "Mischief managed."

"So how did George get it?" Molly asked as Remus pocketed the Map.

"He said during a detention with Filch at the start of the year. It was poking out of a drawer, and he said he felt curious and so he grabbed it," Remus responded.

"George had a detention at the start of the year?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Two days in," Remus told him. "Both he and Fred got caught by Flitwick trying out a spell on a second year, and Ron was with them, although according to George, Ron was just watching, so they all ended up in detention with Filch, and George took the Map. However, I suspect, that George was not meant to take the Map."

"What makes you say that?" Harry asked.

"Because originally the detention was with McGonagall, although Dumbledore switched the detention to Filch, and I believe he placed

the Map there deliberately and used a charm to entice someone to take it," Remus said. "However, Ron was late for the detention as he got lost and George got to the Map first."

Molly frowned. "So you think he expected Ron to take it?"

"Who better than an impressionable Gryffindor first year to try and befriend Harry and his friends?" Remus asked. "I have a suspicion that Dumbledore did it when Harry ended up being sorted into Hufflepuff."

Harry frowned. "The morning after I was sorted Dumbledore mentioned that he had expected me to be in Gryffindor. And Ron didn't exactly hide that he wanted to be friends with me." He sighed. "At least it explains why George butted in when I was supposed to have had that duel with Malfoy."

Remus agreed with Harry. "I believe so. Now the Map is no longer in his possession, George's more natural tendencies will therefore come to the surface, at least concerning you and your friends."

Harry groaned. "Hermione!"

"Sorry?" Remus asked, not quite sure where Harry was going.

"George risked his life to save her at Halloween, and she sort of fancies him," Harry said, his cheeks burning. "And George has been really nice to her as well. Perhaps it's just been because of the spell."

"George didn't have any spells on him that linked him to Hermione, but his loyalty to you might have affected his behavior but only time will tell," Remus told an obviously concerned Harry. "Don't worry too much, Harry."

"But what if Hermione hates me?" Harry asked in a tremulous voice, believing that Hermione might blame him.

Molly tried to reassure him. "I'm sure she won't."

Harry was not quite sure he believed her, and he voiced his biggest concern. "And what about if she and the others only made friends with me because of the spells?"

"Susan and Neville didn't, as they were clean. But you'll know for certain about the others when you see them next," Remus told him. "Justin, Hermione, Ron, and the twins, have all been drafted in as witnesses, and so you'll see them in two days' time when the court case goes ahead."

"Why is Fred being brought in as a witness?" Molly asked.

"Because he quite often used the Map, and, although George was the main user of it, Fred would still have been affected by it," Remus explained.

Harry slumped. "So maybe none of them liked me really."

"I'm sure they did, Harry," Molly said as she hugged him tightly. "Just wait and see."

Next Chapter: Harry finds out about his friends' feelings towards him. The Dursleys, Dumbledore, and Minerva have to face the Wizengamot. Harry has some tough decisions to make.

Note: Apologies to those expecting something different in this chapter, but I changed my mind about what to include in it. Next chapter will hopefully be up Friday, but if not, it will be Monday.

Chapter 16: Harry's Choice

Two Days Later

When he arrived at the courtrooms, Harry could see his friends milling around outside the doors, and he nervously greeted them. "Hi."

Hermione immediately put Harry's fears to rest by throwing herself on him and enveloping him in a bushy haired hug. "Harry, I've been so worried."

Harry almost broke down as he realized that at least Hermione was still his friend. He need not have worried, as one by one, Justin, Fred, Ron, and George all hugged him and assured him that they were also still his friends.

After entering Courtroom ten, they were all shown to a row of seats that had been put aside for witnesses. As he sat down next to Hermione, Harry looked around the courtroom and found it rather bleak, the stone walls being dimly lit by torches. What caught his attention, however, was that in the center of the room there were three chairs with his aunt, cousin, and Marjorie Dursley, Vernon's ghastly sister, sitting on them. Opposite them, and behind an elderly man sitting in a chair on a balcony, who Harry presumed to be Tiberius Ogden, there had to be at least fifty court members, all wearing plum colored robes with an ornate silver 'W' embroidered on them. Behind Harry and his friends sat various people, most of whom Harry did not know, and opposite him sat Remus and the Weasleys.

Harry's attention was returned to the elderly man as he began speaking to those gathered there. "I am Acting Chief Warlock Tiberius Ogden, and in the case of Harry James Potter I am acting Chief Justice." He then addressed the three Dursleys. "My fellow Wizengamot members and I have already viewed and discussed the evidence presented by Madam Bones as head of British Auror Division. And as you have refused magical counsel, before I pass on our findings, do you have anything you wish to say in your defense?"

"We've done nothing wrong," Petunia snapped, her face pale, and her eyes red-rimmed. "It's Potter who should be on trial. My husband died because of him."

Hermione slipped her hand into Harry's as Ogden immediately disagreed. "Mr. Potter had nothing to do with the retribution spell that killed your husband, madam. But I am sorry for your loss."

"Being sorry isn't going to bring my husband back," Petunia all but screamed at the man. "If we hadn't have taken the brat in, then none of this would have happened."

Tiberius Ogden disagreed again. "If you had treated Mr. Potter better, then none of this would have happened."

"We treated him well enough. We put a roof over his head, we clothed and fed him, gave him somewhere to sleep..."

"And, Madam, where did you let him sleep?" Ogden interrupted Petunia's rant.

Petunia flushed. "He had a small room."

"I believe most of us would refer to it as a cupboard," Ogden remarked in a dry voice. "And how often was Mr. Potter allowed to eat during the day?"

"Once," Petunia admitted, having little choice but to tell the truth, having taken Veritaserum. "But..."

Ogden interrupted her. "And his clothing, did it fit him?"

"No, but Dudley's cast-offs were still good quality," Petunia said in a huffy voice.

"And how did you spend the two hundred Galleons per month payment for Mr. Potter's upkeep?"

Harry and some of his friends gasped. They had had no idea that Petunia had been paid so much.

Petunia flushed even deeper red. "We spent it on maintaining a roof over the boy's head." This was true as Petunia had spent a great deal of Harry's money on paying off the mortgage on her home.

"And did you spend any of this money on Mr. Potter?"

"He had food and clothing," Petunia tried to find a way around the truth serum she had been given.

Ogden, however, interrupted her. "He had secondhand clothing and little in the way of food, so I shall ask again, did you directly spend any of this money on Mr. Potter?"

"No," Petunia snarled.

"Thank you, Madam," Ogden said politely. "Do you have anything else you wish to say?"

"No," Petunia snarled again.

"In that case we will move this on. I have reviewed Mr. Potter's memories and those taken from you, and I have come to the conclusion that the way you treated an innocent child was completely without regard to his wellbeing. You not only starved Mr. Potter, but forced him to perform tasks far beyond those a child of his age should have been asked to do. I have also considered your written statement in which you declared that you did not wish to take on Mr. Potter, since you abhor and fear magic. But given that you took the money that was offered for his care, I am afraid I have to disregard that part of your written statement. And, given your repeated acts of bodily harm and, dare I say it, torture, you have left me little choice but to treat you as I would any other magical criminal." Ogden turned to the Interrogators. "Does anyone have anything to add before I ask for a vote?"

No-one did, and so Ogden asked for a vote, and even given what his aunt had done to him, Harry was surprised that every single one of the Interrogators found his aunt guilty.

"Petunia Marie Dursley, you have been found guilty of neglect, child abuse, misappropriation of funds, and torture. It is therefore my decision that in two days' time you will be taken from your holding cell in the Ministry to the Death Chamber where you will be

administered the Kiss for your crimes. Once the Kiss has been administered, your body will be cast through the death arch. Also, any property you own will be sold to make recompense to Mr. Potter."

Shocked and pale, Petunia was unable to respond as Ogden went on. "Dudley Dursley, after viewing your memories, although I blame your parents for some of your actions, you still abused and tortured Harry Potter, even when Mr. Potter made overtures towards you in an attempt to be friendly. And your last act against him caused not only injury to Mr. Potter and yourself but, by way of a retribution spell, also caused the death of your father."

Dudley began sobbing. "I didn't know."

"That is beside the point," Ogden said. "Do you have anything you wish to say in your defense?"

"I'm sorry," Dudley wept. "But Mum said I could hurt Potter."

Harry felt more than a little sick and disgusted at Dudley's words, and looking at the faces of the witnesses and Wizengamot, a great deal of them did as well. He squeezed Hermione's hand as she tightened her grip.

"Is there anything else?"

When Dudley shook his head, Ogden turned to the face the Interrogators. "If no-one has anything they wish to add, may I please have your vote?"

Unlike with Petunia, several members this time did not find Dudley guilty, but with the majority doing so, the vote was carried.

"Dudley Vernon Dursley, you have been found guilty of inflicting bodily harm on Harry James Potter, and you will serve five years in the young offenders section of Azkaban for your crimes."

Dudley carried on crying as the process took in Marge Dursley, who was also found guilty of child abuse. Ogden again weighed up Marge's attacks on Harry before coming to a decision after a guilty vote.

"Marjorie Olive Dursley, you have been found guilty of child abuse, although to a much lesser degree than the other members of your family. I have therefore decided that you will pay Mr. Potter the sum of five thousand Galleons in recompense. If you cannot pay the fine, then you will serve two years in Azkaban. Do you have the ability to pay the fine?"

"How should I know? I don't know much five thousand Galleons is in pounds." Marge barked her words out in a booming voice that carried throughout the Courtroom.

Ogden also had no idea. "I will need to check with Gringotts."

Remus held up a hand. "May I speak, Chief Justice?"

"Go ahead, Mr. Lupin," Ogden said.

"One Galleon is worth approximately five Muggle pounds," Remus informed him. "But Gringotts will be able to provide an exact exchange rate."

"Thank you," Ogden said, and he turned to face a now purple faced and obviously angry Marjorie Dursley. "Do you have twenty five thousand pounds?"

"No," Marjorie spat out. "I'd have to sell my house."

"The choice is yours, Madam," Ogden told her. "Which do you choose?"

Marjorie thought about it before choosing the cash option. "The house."

"In that case, you will be required to swear an oath to that effect before you leave. If you renege on the oath you will die," Ogden stated. He was quite sure though that Marjorie Dursley had no idea that as a Muggle, the oath would have no effect on her at all. But having seen her memories, he was well aware that like most bullies, she was probably a coward at heart, and that she would do anything that she believed would save her own skin. "Also, you will swear an oath to keep our world secret. If you try to tell anyone about it you will die. Once all business has been concluded and your home sold to recompense Mr. Potter, you will be stripped of any

knowledge of magic. You will also believe that your brother and his family died in a car accident."

Harry was beginning to think that Remus had been wrong about the Wizengamot asking for his opinion, when Ogden suddenly addressed Harry. "Mr. Potter, you have heard the charges set out against the Dursleys and my recommendations as to their punishments. I now need to know if you agree with my sentencing."

Harry was torn. He really hated his aunt but he still was unsure if he could condemn her to such a horrible death. He therefore asked Tiberius Ogden if he could talk to his aunt. "May I speak to my aunt first before I decide?"

"Of course," Tiberius said.

Harry had another question to ask of the judge before he did. "And she has to tell the truth?"

"She does," Tiberius confirmed.

Nervously, Harry gave Hermione's hand one last squeeze before he walked over on shaking legs to where his relatives were seated. "Do you feel sorry about how you've treated me?"

Petunia answered almost immediately, her voice full of hatred. "Of course. I'm going to die because of you."

Harry shook his head. "No, I mean if you weren't going to die, and no-one did anything to you, would you be sorry, Aunt Petunia?"

Petunia struggled against the Veritaserum, beads of sweat lining her upper lip as she tried to keep quiet. But she fought a losing battle. "No."

"And did you enjoy hurting me?" Harry asked, needing to know, given what Dudley had said about Petunia seemingly encouraging him to hurt Harry.

Again Petunia struggled but again she failed. "Yes."

Harry turned back to Tiberius Ogden. "Can I talk to Remus and the Weasleys before I say anything?"

"You may," Ogden said, understanding that this was a difficult position Harry had been placed in, and he had raked Amelia over the coals for placing Harry in it, when Remus would have been better able to deal with the responsibility.

Harry moved over to Remus and the Weasleys and he kept his voice as low as he could, not wanting his voice to carry. "Would I be bad if I said that my aunt deserves what Justice Ogden said?"

Molly shook her head. "No, Harry, but remember you will have to live with your decision."

This gave Harry food for thought and he looked at Remus. "What do you think?"

Remus laid a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I think she deserves it. But I can sense you're unsure, so if you can't deal with it, let Chief Justice Ogden know that."

Taking a deep breath, Harry turned around to face the acting head of the Wizengamot. "Even though I hate her, I'm not sure about my aunt, Chief Justice. I think she deserves to be punished, but I don't want to have to be the one who has to say she has to die."

Tiberius Ogden was unsurprised by Harry's statement, and he answered it with a question of his own. "If your aunt were in your shoes, do you think she would be lenient with you?"

Although he suspected what the outcome of telling the truth would be, Harry was not about to lie. "No, Sir."

"Then I stand by my decision," Ogden said. "Your aunt will be taken from here and the Kiss will be administered two days from now, so that she may have time to reflect upon her misdeeds before her sentence is carried out."

Petunia finally broke, and she was dragged screaming from the courtroom, Dudley continuing to weep pitifully as he watched his mother go but unable to move to try to get to her as he was bound to the chair with golden chains.

Harry was once again asked for his opinion. "And what of your cousin's and Marjorie Dursley's sentences?"

"Marjorie Dursley deserves her sentence," Harry said, loathing Vernon's sister. "But Dudley's just lost his dad because of what he did to me. I don't think he should have to go to prison, or at least not somewhere as scary as Azkaban."

Marjorie Dursley was led out, and as Dudley's sobs got louder, Ogden turned to him. "Dudley Vernon Dursley, you should be thankful that your cousin has a more generous nature than my own. In the light of his request, I have decided that you will be obliviated of any knowledge of magic, and you will then be taken from here and placed in a Muggle child care facility. You will believe that you and your family were involved in a car accident and that your parents both died, as did your aunt, and cousin, who you will believe was just a normal boy like you, and not magical."

Dudley interrupted him, tears streaming down his terrified face. "Why?"

"Because we have to protect our world from people like your family, Mr. Dursley," Ogden said. "And tying up all the loose ends like this will ensure that happens."

Dudley shook his head. "Please don't take away my memories."

Ogden let out a long breath, and turned the decision back to Harry. "Mr. Potter, this decision is yours."

This time Harry did not ask for permission to speak to his possible guardians, and he turned to Remus and the Weasleys. "I don't know what to do."

"Do you think that Dudley would be a better person for keeping his memories?" Arthur asked, trying to put it into perspective for Harry.

Harry thought about it for a minute or two before shaking his head. "No. He might be nicer without his parents and aunt to egg him on. And if he can't remember magic, he might be different."

"Then you should trust your instincts," Molly said, gently touching Harry's cheek before Harry turned away.

Feeling bolstered, Harry turned to face his cousin. "Dudley, I know you're scared but I think that without your parents and your memories about me and magic you might be nicer."

"Then my decision stands," Ogden decided. "Dudley Dursley you will be obliterated of all magical knowledge, be implanted with the knowledge I have determined, and then you will be placed back in the Muggle world. I just hope you use this second chance wisely."

Harry was relieved when the acting Chief Warlock called for a break, giving Harry some time to gather himself. Molly immediately took him under wing, holding her against him, to find Harry was shaking, and so she gently put him away from her, fairly sure of what he was thinking. "Harry, what has happened to your family is not your fault."

"I know but I still feel sick," Harry said.

"You wouldn't be human if you didn't," Arthur told him. "But Tiberius Ogden is a fair judge, and your cousin got off a lot lighter than he should have because of you."

"But I'm going to let my aunt die," Harry said, his voice filled with horror as his mind created terrifying images. "And I could have stopped it. Oh God, she's going to die because of me and I could have stopped it."

As Harry started to panic and hyperventilate, Molly cast a spell on him to calm him down, and Remus went in search of Tiberius Ogden. Harry was in tears and being comforted by Molly when Tiberius came in. "I understand from Mr. Lupin that you're having second thoughts about your aunt."

Harry nodded, tears running down his cheeks. "I know she deserves it but I can't do it, Sir."

Seeing how upset Harry was, Tiberius made an offer. "If your aunt is willing to genuinely repent by the time the sentence is to be carried out, then I will commute it to life."

Harry sagged in relief against Molly. "Thank you, Sir."

Tiberius placed a gentle hand on Harry's shoulder. "You might not be thanking me if she doesn't change her mind."

"But I'll at least know she had a chance," Harry said, feeling better about this option.

"Do you feel up to the next part?" Tiberius asked, thinking that Harry was rather pale.

Harry nodded, wiping away his tears. "My relatives were the worst bit."

"Then we'll be returning in a few minutes," Tiberius told him, and he headed off.

When Harry came out, he noticed that this time there were now only two chairs, and that Albus and Minerva were seated on them, although unlike his relatives, they were not bound. Harry found, however, he was unable to look at them.

Tiberius began. "Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall, please confirm that you have decided to act as your own counsel."

They both confirmed Tiberius' statement. Satisfied, Tiberius asked another question of them both. "Professor McGonagall and Headmaster Dumbledore, have you familiarized yourself with the charges?"

"I have," Minerva said, and then she shut up.

"I have," Albus also said, although he spared Harry a quick glance, noting that Harry was looking down at the floor, before he went on. "And I wish to state that everything I have done has been for the best."

Tiberius had expected this, and he immediately went on the offensive, bringing up the night when Harry had been left on his relatives' doorstep. "I hardly consider leaving a fifteen month toddler in the middle of a Muggle street for the best, Headmaster."

"He was sleeping and unlikely to wander off," Albus said in his defense.

"Did you put up wards to prevent this?" Tiberius asked.

Albus avoided answering the question directly. "I did not feel that wards were necessary. It was the middle of the night, and..."

Tiberius broke in to stop Albus' oratory. "Then the answer is no. I find it hard enough to comprehend how anyone could leave a toddler on a doorstep, but the fact that it was the middle of the night is even more disturbing. Can you imagine a frightened toddler waking up in the dark, alone on a strange street?"

"As I've already said, I do not believe that Harry would have wandered off."

"That still does not take away from the facts, Headmaster." Tiberius turned to Minerva. "Professor McGonagall, did you agree to this?"

"Not initially," Minerva said. "But the Headmaster said it was for the best, and so I went along with it."

"Why did you have initial reservations, Professor McGonagall?"

"I viewed Mr. Potter's relatives and found them to be the worst kind of Muggles." With Veritaserum in her system, Minerva found herself repeating what she had said to Albus on the day they had left Harry with the Dursleys.

"And yet you left Mr. Potter with them," Tiberius stated, making notes as he did so. "And, given that these Muggles disturbed you enough to make a protest, albeit an empty one, did you ever check on Mr. Potter during the time he was left with the Dursleys up until he attended Hogwarts?"

"No," Minerva said.

"Why not?"

"Because I thought that Albus was right, and that Petunia Dursley would not be unkind to a baby," Minerva said, her cheeks reddening.

"But she was," Tiberius said, a frown marring his features. "I will return to you in one moment. Headmaster Dumbledore, you chose Minerva McGonagall as Mr. Potter's guardian. Why?"

"I trust Minerva," Albus said, keeping his answer simple.

"And does Mr. Potter trust you both?" Tiberius asked, well aware of the spells that had been on Harry's wand.

"I believe so," Albus said. "But I cannot answer categorically for Harry. Only he can do that."

Tiberius turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter, please tell me, do you trust either of the accused?"

"No," Harry said forcefully.

Tiberius then turned to Harry's friends. "Miss Granger, Mr. Finch-Fletchley, and all three Mr. Weasleys, do any of you trust Headmaster Dumbledore?"

All five children shook their heads. Tiberius' next move surprised everyone, particularly Albus. "Professor McGonagall, do you trust Headmaster Dumbledore?"

"Not anymore, Chief Justice," Minerva said, her face set.

"Minerva?" Albus was surprised, and it showed.

Tiberius smiled. "I believe you expected a positive response from all those I have just questioned. But I'm afraid that the spells you placed on items belonging to them have been removed, and if any of them decide to return to Hogwarts, then all of their belongings will be checked on regular occasions to ensure that you do not repeat your actions."

"I only did it for the best," Albus said in his defense yet again, once more unwittingly giving Tiberius another choice opportunity to attack him.

"And is it for the best that you are hiding the Philosopher's Stone at Hogwarts, Headmaster?" Tiberius asked, garnering more than a few shocked gasps from the audience. "Especially given that it is

something that I believe You-Know-Who would dearly love to possess."

"Nicolas needed somewhere safe to keep it, and I believed Hogwarts to be that option," Albus responded.

"But not the safest option for your pupils, in particular, for Mr. Potter," Tiberius said, letting none of the satisfaction he was actually feeling at being able to take Albus down a peg or two showing. "I understand he was accosted in the Forbidden Forest by an unknown assailant, who I am almost certain was after the Stone, and who, like Mr. Potter, I believe to be someone aiding You-Know-Who."

"Harry should never have entered the Forbidden Forest," Albus said in his defense.

"That is beside the point, Headmaster," Tiberius told him. "And unless you take immediate steps to remove the Stone, then I will petition to have both it and you removed from Hogwarts."

"It will be returned to Nicolas on my return to Hogwarts," Albus promised, well aware that Tiberius would do exactly as he threatened if he did not.

"And the Cerberus should also be returned to its owner," Tiberius said, making it clear that he knew of the dog's existence.

"Now, to return to Mr. Potter's guardianship," Tiberius said. "Professor McGonagall, as he had no idea that you too had been influenced by Headmaster Dumbledore, Mr. Potter has requested that you should be relieved of your position as guardian to him. In the light of the statements Madam Bones took from both the Headmaster and yourself before this trial, and in light of what I have learnt so far today, I still believe it would be in Mr. Potter's interest to pursue that change. Mr. Potter, do you agree?"

Even though Minerva had been influenced by Dumbledore, Harry still felt as though he could no longer trust her, but he was uncomfortable putting it into words. "I, um..."

Minerva broke into Harry's indecisive comment. "May I address the Court, Chief Justice?"

"You may," Tiberius said, guessing what Minerva was about to do.

"I am of the opinion that the Court should leave Mr. Potter's request unchanged," Minerva said. "Although I never intended Harry any harm, I do believe that what has transpired has damaged our previous relationship, and I think it might be better to start afresh."

Tiberius turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter, do you concur?"

Albus interrupted before Harry could answer him. "Despite what she thinks, I believe that removing Harry from Minerva's care would be a grave mistake, as would selling the Dursley residence. I would..."

Ogden interrupted Albus. "How do you know about the Dursley residence?"

"I overheard a guard talking about your sentencing of the Dursleys," Albus said, before going on. "And I believe it would be in Harry's best interests if you would reconsider letting Dudley Dursley keep his memories and have him placed in care at the house. Being of the same blood, this would ensure Harry's safety."

"Why?"

"Because of blood wards that exist around the house. Until he reaches the age of majority, Harry needs to spend at least two weeks per year there in order to keep him safe from anyone who would cause him harm, and to renew the blood wards."

"They didn't keep him safe from his aunt and her family, but I will consider your request."

Tiberius then turned away and began to confer with Nova Christmas, a senior Interrogator and someone whose opinion he trusted. After speaking to her, he turned back. "After conferring with my colleague, I have decided to delay the order on Dudley Dursley until I can consult an expert on blood wards." He turned to Harry. "Do you agree?"

"I don't want to go back there," Harry said in a stubborn voice.

"Not even if it means keeping you safe?" Tiberius asked, although he was hardly surprised by Harry's reluctance to return to Privet Drive.

Molly beckoned to Harry, who went over to the side of the courtroom where she was sitting. "Harry, I know that you hate that house, but please think about your safety. Your aunt and uncle are both effectively dead, and I doubt your cousin would hurt you. Either way, I'll come with you if you have to go and spend two weeks there."

Harry sighed and turned back around. "Okay, I'll wait."

"Very well," Tiberius said, wondering what Molly had said as he had been unable to hear. He pointed to an Auror. "Please ensure that the new order is carried out."

The Auror left the court and the case continued, Albus quickly offering up a suggestion. "Arabella Figg, a squib and former teacher, lives just four doors down from the Dursleys. If Harry decides to return, then she could take care of him and Dudley."

"I'm well aware of that fact, but I do not consider her a suitable guardian," Tiberius told Albus. "Especially as she declared that she had told you on more than one occasion that Mr. Potter seemed far from happy, and..."

"I decided on that first occasion that she was being oversensitive," Albus broke in and responded. "Just because Harry seemed a little down, does not mean he was being treated badly."

"Maybe not, but as Mrs. Figg did nothing to follow up on her observations, I believe she is a poor choice for guardian."

"So who will become Harry's guardian?" Albus asked.

"After careful consideration, I have decided to award guardianship of Mr. Potter to Arthur and Molly Weasley, who have both met strict background checks." Tiberius watched Albus' lips tighten. "If at any time they become unable to take care of Mr. Potter, then his guardianship will revert to Remus Lupin, who has passed the same background checks."

Amelia Bones stood up. "I must object. Remus Lupin is someone I do not believe would be a suitable guardian."

Tiberius addressed her concerns. "On what grounds?"

Amelia relayed Remus' actions at the Dursleys' home and at the hospital. "...and I therefore stand by my protestation."

"Mr. Lupin, do you offer up any defense?"

Remus stood up. "I'm not going to deny that I wasn't angry, because I was. However, my anger was directed to those who had hurt Harry, and not Harry himself. As part of the guardianship process I have passed the background checks as well as swearing that I would do my utmost to protect and care for Harry should his custody fall upon my shoulders."

Tiberius turned to confer with his colleagues before turning back. "The decision to appoint you as Mr. Potter's alternate guardian stands, Mr. Lupin. Madam Bones, your concern is dismissed."

Amelia was far from happy but she had little choice but to accept the ruling. She could see, however, that Harry appeared to be happy about the decision. This was confirmed when Tiberius asked, "Mr. Potter, are you happy with the new guardianship arrangements?"

"I am," Harry said, feeling relieved that he would have someone he cared about to take over his guidance. "As long as the Weasleys get the allowance that the Dursleys were getting."

"Your father stipulated that whoever had your care would receive the money, so in answer to your question, yes, they will receive the two hundred Galleons a month for your care."

"But we don't want paying to take care of Harry," Molly blurted out, unable to help herself.

"I'm afraid it comes along with the responsibility of Mr. Potter's care," Tiberius said, liking Arthur's wife immensely. "So you have no choice."

Molly shut up, and Harry felt a wave of love for the woman who, unlike his relatives, wanted to nothing to care of him.

Tiberius then turned his attention back to Minerva. "Now that matter has been resolved, we should move on. Minerva Stewart McGonagall, although I believe you were influenced to a great degree by Albus Dumbledore's spells, you still should have checked on Mr. Potter during his childhood and failed to do so. Under the circumstances you are hereby sentenced to one year in Azkaban for your part in Mr. Potter's abandonment. However, if Mr. Potter so agrees, the sentence will only become effective should you abuse the parole period of three years. You are also fined two thousand Galleons, which will be paid to Mr. Potter." He looked to Harry. "Do you agree?"

Harry was not thrilled at what Minerva had done but he decided that Albus had been the main problem. "I do, except I don't want the money. Professor McGonagall bought me clothes and she bought me a Nimbus 2000."

"In which case the fine will be halved," Tiberius decided. "Is this acceptable?"

Harry nodded. "Okay."

Tiberius made a note and then looked at Minerva. "Our business with you is now concluded." Tiberius now turned his attention to Albus, who had relaxed, believing he would be treated somewhat similarly to Minerva. His sentencing, however, was to be deferred as Tiberius brought up the retribution spell that had been placed on Privet Drive. "Headmaster Dumbledore, are you aware of a retribution spell that was placed on the Dursley household?"

Completely unaware that Vernon was dead, having been held in the Ministry holding cells since being brought in by Amelia, Albus had no problem admitting to it. "I am."

"And are you aware that the retribution spell caused the death of Vernon Dursley?"

Albus went white. "No, and if you are bringing charges against me in relation to that death, then you should have made me aware of that."

"I did not know for certain until you confirmed just now that you were responsible for the spell," Tiberius said, pointing out the loophole in Albus' statement.

"What happened?" Albus demanded to know.

Since Albus was acting as his own counsel, Tiberius filled him in on what had happened. "...and unfortunately despite every effort, Mr. Dursley died."

"May I have a few minutes to consider this?" Albus asked.

"You may," Tiberius said and he got to his feet. "The court will adjourn for a short recess of thirty minutes. Professor McGonagall, you are free to leave."

Minerva was relieved to step down from the chair and she was led out of the court, where she was taken to swear an oath to adhere to her suspended sentence and to make arrangements to pay the fine that had been imposed upon her.

Albus was led into a side room where he glanced at the Aurors flanking him. He knew that things were not going well, and he was unlikely to be able to talk himself out of this one. Not willing to face the horrors of Azkaban, he decided that fleeing was his best option, and so he lifted his hands above his head and clapped.

The four Aurors looked at each other, and one of them asked if Albus was okay.

"I'm fine," Albus snapped, wondering why Fawkes had not come to his rescue. Deciding he would do better to simply apparate out, he tried that, only for it also to fail. As he did not need a wand to apparate, the Aurors were none the wiser as to Albus' attempt, but, having no wand, he was also out of options.

Ten minutes later Albus found himself back in the courtroom, as a disapproving Tiberius Ogden addressed the Court. "For those of you who are not aware, Headmaster Dumbledore has just made a futile attempt to escape."

Gasps and shocked exclamations echoed around the room including one from Albus. Tiberius turned his attention to Albus. "The Aurors

who were guarding you reported on your strange behavior. I didn't expect you to take kindly to the idea of being placed in Azkaban, and having witnessed you using your phoenix as a method of escape before, I took the precaution of having the magic in both this room and the adjacent one nullified as soon as we adjourned."

Albus challenged Tiberius' statement. "You can't prove I tried to escape."

In response, Tiberius turned to the Aurors on duty. "Please have a magical nullifying wrist cuff placed on the Headmaster. I can't risk him having his pet rescue him when I give the order to reinstitute magic."

Surrounded by ten Aurors who seemed to appear out of nowhere, Albus had little choice but to submit, although his face said he was far from happy.

"So let's continue, shall we?" Tiberius said after an Auror reported back to say that the nullification spell had been lifted. "Auror Solace, please let the Headmaster use your wand to swear that he did not just try to escape from the side room during recess."

Albus sagged visibly, aware he would die if he made such an oath. "I refuse to do so."

"Then I will take your refusal as an admittance of guilt," Tiberius told him. "Let us proceed. Please administer another dose of Veritaserum." After it had been done, Tiberius continued. "Headmaster, you have admitted that you imposed the retribution spell that led to Vernon Dursley's death. Do you offer up any defense?"

"Yes," Albus said, although he was aware that he would not be doing himself any favors by using the defense but it was better than the alternative, which could lead to his death. "I knew for sure just before Mr. Potter joined Hogwarts that the Dursleys were ill-treating Mr. Potter, and so I threatened Petunia Dursley with the retribution spell."

"So you admit to being aware of abuse?" Tiberius asked.

"I do," Albus said.

Tiberius decided to bring up an earlier point again. "And after Mrs. Figg's first report to you, where you say you decided she was being oversensitive, did her continued reports ever given you reason to suspect that Mr. Potter was being abused?"

"They did but there was never evidence provided by Mrs. Figg to back up her reports," Albus said.

"And you did nothing to check?"

"Harry needed to be kept safe from anyone who might seek to kill him, and I knew the blood wards would do that," Albus offered up in his defense.

"So the fact that Mr. Potter was enduring what some might consider as a living hell never occurred to you?"

"Of course it did, but I did not honestly believe that Petunia would be so unkind to Harry, and that it was in his best interests to live with the Dursleys," Albus responded in a firm voice.

Tiberius thought for a moment before asking a question that he knew might help to secure a guilty verdict, but it also opened up the possibility of a complete acquittal; everything depended upon Albus' response. "So if you could turn back time to that night you left Mr. Potter..."

"But we can't go back that far," Albus interrupted.

"Please let me finish," Tiberius said, more than a little irritated by Albus' interruption. "When you left Mr. Potter, if you knew then what you know now, would you still have left him there?"

Albus scowled but just like everyone else who took Veritaserum, he had little choice but to answer truthfully. "Yes, but it was in his best interests."

"So you keep saying," Tiberius said in a somewhat sarcastic voice, and then he moved on. "I'd like to discuss the retribution spell now. Did you intend for the spell to cause as much damage as it did?"

"I did not," Albus immediately said. "I thought that Petunia would warn her family and that it would ensure Harry's safety."

"Why didn't you visit her earlier and use the same spell?"

"Because although I suspected that Harry was being mistreated, I had no idea as to the severity until he joined Hogwarts."

Satisfied that Albus was telling the truth, Tiberius turned away and consulted with his fellow Wizengamot members, before turning back around. "We have no further questions for you. Do you have anything else that you wish to say?"

"I do not," Albus confirmed, not wanting to make things even worse for himself than he suspected they already were.

"Then I will first ask for a vote whether to bring charges against you in relation to Vernon Dursley's death," Tiberius announced. He was a little disappointed when, by a majority of three, the motion was thrown out.

Albus did not bother to hide his delight at the decision. His smile soon vanished though as Tiberius moved on. "I would now like a vote on the charges against the Headmaster in relation to Mr. Potter."

This time most, but not all, of the Wizengamot voted to find Dumbledore guilty, and so Tiberius folded his hands and addressed Albus. "Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, while you have continually stated that you acted in Mr. Potter's best interests, I find myself disagreeing. Normally I would impose a suspended custodial sentence upon you as you did not physically hurt Mr. Potter yourself but given that you freely admitted to being aware of Mr. Potter's ill treatment, I find I cannot do anything else in this case except to impose a custodial sentence, effective immediately."

"But..." Albus tried to interrupt.

"You had a chance to offer up further defense," Tiberius stated, "and you said you had nothing further to say, so I would be much obliged if you would remain silent during your sentencing or I will arrange for you to be rendered silent."

As Albus shut his mouth, Tiberius continued. "As I was saying, given your knowledge of Mr. Potter's ill treatment and your admittance that you would have repeated your actions if you had known what Mr. Potter would have to endure, I have therefore decided that you will serve six years and three months in Azkaban for risking Mr. Potter's life as a child, for abandonment, for gross negligence, and for endangering both Mr. Potter and his fellow pupils at Hogwarts. By the time you have finished serving your sentence, Mr. Potter will no longer be attending Hogwarts, and he will therefore not be forced to endure your presence unless he opts to do so. You will also pay recompense to Mr. Potter in the sum of ten thousand galleons. Finally, given that I believe you will attempt to escape again and try to avoid paying your dues for your crimes against Mr. Potter, you will be drained of your magic."

With his back against the figurative wall, Albus used the only option he had left. "Before you can finalize my sentence, you have to ask Harry if he agrees to it, as he is listed as the primary filer in this matter."

All eyes in the court turned to Harry.

Next Chapter: Harry makes his decision.

Chapter 17: Fall From Grace

Harry finally met Albus' eyes, and he squared his shoulders. "I don't agree with the decision."

Albus' eyes began twinkling like crazy, daring to let himself believe that Harry was going to go easy on him; that Harry would realize that everything he had done had been for the best. "I didn't think you would."

Everyone was absolutely stunned, except for Remus, who could feel Harry's disdain flowing from him like waves. Tiberius resisted the temptation to sigh. "What don't you agree with?"

"I don't think the Headmaster should be drained of his magic," Harry said, making Albus' eyes brighten even more.

"Why not?"

Unlike with his relatives, Harry had no problem in answering Tiberius' question and did not need to refer to anyone else. "Because when I was growing up I wanted nothing more than to escape to a world where magic existed. And now that I live in a world like that, where I'm magical, I think it would be the most horrible thing ever to lose my magic, except for that Dementor kiss thingy." Harry pointed to the cuff around Dumbledore's wrist. "Can't he wear something like that all of the time instead? At least then when he got out of prison he would still be able to do magic." After a moment, Harry added one final comment. "Unless he tries to escape or does something bad, and then you should drain his magic."

Tiberius made a note of Harry's suggestion, having noted Albus' relieved expression change to a frown at Harry's addition to his statement. "And the rest of the sentence?"

"I don't think six years is fair."

Given Harry's actions so far, Harry's words gave Albus some hope as Tiberius asked for Harry's opinion. "What do you think is fair?"

Although Harry had been willing to be generous with the magical issue, Harry brought Albus crashing back down to Earth with his answer about the length of the sentence. "Because he knew the

Dursleys were being horrid to me, and because Dumbledore would have still let me live there if he could turn back time, he should have to spend as long in Azkaban as I did living with the Dursleys."

"A fitting sentence," Tiberius noted as he began to tot up the time. "You were sent to live with them in November of '81, and you left to go to school in September of '91, so that gives us nine years and ten months." Tiberius then asked about the final part of his recommended sentence. "And the monetary payment?"

Harry was not so bothered about the money. "I don't care about it."

"Then we'll leave it as it stands," Tiberius decided. He then turned to the Interrogators. A short time later he turned back around. "Headmaster Dumbledore, we have discussed the changes that Mr. Potter has requested, and we have decided to grant them. Therefore you will serve nine years and ten months in Azkaban and you will be allowed to keep your magic. A magical restraint will, however, be worn at all times. Should you attempt to escape or commit any infringement while in Azkaban, then, as Mr. Potter suggested, the original sentence imposed upon you of the removal of your magic will be instigated."

Almost unable to believe that Harry had treated him so harshly, Albus slumped in his chair. "But I only did what was for the best."

"I'm afraid neither I nor Mr. Potter sees it that way," Tiberius said firmly, before pushing matters forward. "Now to move on to the charges in the case of Mr. Potter's friends and Professor McGonagall..."

Each of Harry's friends ended up with five hundred Galleons apiece in compensation, and because his abuse of Minerva dated much further back, Dumbledore ended up having to pay her two thousand Galleons. When Tiberius had finally ascertained that all were happy with the imposed fines, he rose to his feet. "That concludes this case."

"I'll appeal," Albus said in a tight voice, anger now beginning to override his despair.

"Be my guest. Your case might just get unburied before you finish your sentence," Tiberius could not resist responding, although he

knew that an appeal date would be available much quicker than that. "Please escort the Headmaster to his new lodgings." He then waited until the Aurors and Dumbledore had almost reached the door, before saying, "Oh, and for attempting to escape, your sentence has been increased by two years, and you may not appeal this particular part of the sentence." He turned to Harry. "I'm afraid I am unable to ask your opinion on this one, Mr. Potter, as the attempted escape is a Wizengamot matter."

"That's okay," Harry said, simply relieved that it was now almost over.

Nova Christmas stood up. "Before the Headmaster leaves, under the circumstances, I would like to offer a vote of no confidence in our current Chief Warlock, and ask that a vote be made to replace him with a new Chief Warlock. I would also like it noted that I will be petitioning the ICW for the Headmaster's removal as Supreme Mugwump."

Now sitting next to Hermione, Minerva also spoke up before Tiberius could answer Nova. "And if the Court so permits, I also have a request to make. I see at least nine of the twelve governors of Hogwarts here. If they all agree, I wish to table a vote of no confidence in Albus Dumbledore as headmaster of Hogwarts."

Tiberius followed procedure. "Please let the Headmaster remain a moment. We'll deal with Interrogator Christmas' motion first." He then turned to face the gathered Wizengamot. "Will anyone second Interrogator Christmas' motion to have Headmaster Dumbledore deposed?"

Amelia Bones stood up. "I will."

"Then the motion for a vote for no confidence is on the floor." Tiberius expected it to be a foregone conclusion, and for Albus' fall from grace to be almost complete. "Please raise your hands if you agree that the current Chief Warlock should be removed from his office."

A count ensued, Nova and Amelia both being unable to vote. "Thirty seven for, so the motion is carried." Tiberius then turned back to face Albus. "You are absolved from your duties as Chief Warlock, Headmaster." He then brought up the petition. "Does anyone else

wish to petition for the Headmaster's removal as Supreme Mugwump?"

Thirty eight hands went up, Nova again being unable to vote as she had made the petition, and Tiberius tapped a sheaf of paper in front of him and writing magically appeared on it, before the paper folded itself up and landed back on the desk. "The petition has been made and will be sent once this case is over." He finally turned his attention to Minerva. "The floor is all yours, Madam."

Minerva looked across and up at the governors, one of whom was Lucius Malfoy, who was sitting in the spectator section of the courtroom, and someone she suspected would agree with her. "Governors of Hogwarts, how say you in the matter of removing Albus Dumbledore as Headmaster?"

"I agree with your request," Lucius said before anyone else could respond. "All those who are with me, raise their hand." One by one, the other eight governors in the courtroom lifted their hands, and Lucius took point. "The majority required for dissolution of Headmaster Dumbledore's removal is a two-thirds majority, which means Albus Dumbledore that you are no longer headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry, and as per the rules of the school, your Deputy will now take over from you." He looked around at his fellow governors. "Do we agree?"

Although one, an old flame of Minerva's, dissented, eight members were still enough to have the motion carried. Although he was glad to see the back of Dumbledore, Lucius also had no real wish to see Minerva running the school, However, he was well aware that Filius Flitwick was next in line, and given the choice, he would rather see Minerva in charge than someone he considered a half-breed. "Headmistress McGonagall, the school is yours to run as you see fit. I will ensure that the necessary paperwork is filed with the Ministry for you."

"Thank, Mr. Malfoy," Minerva said. "I look forward to receiving a copy."

"But you can't do this," Albus protested angrily. "I..."

Tiberius had no wish to listen to Albus protesting and he looked pointedly at the lead Auror. "You may take him away." The sound of

Albus' protestations died away as he was manhandled from the courtroom. Tiberius once again addressed Minerva. "Headmistress McGonagall, would you please arrange for the transportation of the Philosopher's Stone and the Cerberus back to their rightful owners?"

"I will," Minerva said.

Tiberius stood up. "Then that concludes this case. Court dismissed."

Azkaban Prison

Sirius Black became aware of voices getting closer to his cell, and of one voice in particular that was protesting vociferously. As he got up, he realized that he recognized the complaining voice, and a tiny smile crossed his lips as the manacled former headmaster of Hogwarts was led into the cell opposite him. Sirius waited until the guards had left before leaning casually against the bars of his cell door. "Fancy seeing you here."

Albus was more than a little surprised to be addressed by Sirius. "Black!"

"Glad you still managed to recognize me," Sirius said, his voice filled with more than a little bitterness. "So what brings the illustrious Supreme Mugwump to Azkaban? Checking that your scapegoat is still behind bars?"

Albus snorted, choosing to ignore the question and instead responding to Sirius' accusation that he had been a scapegoat. "There were witnesses who saw you kill Pettigrew, Black. You were no scapegoat."

With the man who had been one of the three people who had signed the order for his imprisonment close at hand and having no choice but to listen to him, Sirius let rip, years of pent-up anger exploding out of him. "No scapegoat? How the fuck can you stand there and say that? You know as well as I do that James had decided to change his mind about his secret keeper, and..."

Sirius' angry tirade was interrupted by Albus. "But I had no proof."

"That's because you wouldn't let me provide any. You let them lock me up without a trial, you bastard!" Sirius shouted at Dumbledore.

"You wouldn't even see me, and you've denied every appeal I've filed since then!"

"Your appeals have been denied because it would have been a waste of my time and the courts'. You killed Pettigrew, end of story." Believing that Sirius would now shut up, Albus went to turn away, only to remain where he was when Sirius' rant continued.

"I didn't kill Pettigrew," Sirius snarled. "He framed me somehow, and I'm willing to bet he's still out there."

"I doubt that very much, Black. I saw memories that were provided by both a witness and an arresting Auror of what happened that day," Albus barked back, his own voice climbing in volume, as all he wanted to do was to sit down and try to figure out what had gone wrong, but it was obvious that Black was not going to let him do that. "You killed Pettigrew and thirteen Muggles and then you stood there laughing."

"I was in shock," Sirius said in his defense.

"Shock that you'd been caught," Albus argued.

"No, it was shock that Pettigrew would do something so terrible," Sirius countered.

Albus refuted Sirius' statement. "Pettigrew did nothing terrible. You were the one who did that. All they ever found of Pettigrew was his finger. You blew the man apart!"

"I did nothing of the sort," Sirius said loudly. "And you know it, despite what you think you saw."

"I know what I saw," Albus said in just as loud a voice. "And it was you who killed Pettigrew and those innocent Muggles. And that's why I supported the decision to lock you up without a trial. It was a cut and dried case."

"No, it wasn't," Sirius disagreed angrily. "If I had been allowed to take Veritaserum, the truth would have come out, and you would have lost control over the one person who possibly stands a chance of killing Voldemort, my godson."

"So you know about the prophecy?" Albus asked, his voice reflecting his astonishment.

"James told me about it when he first asked me to be his secret keeper," Sirius said, surprised that Albus even had to ask. "Did you really think he'd ask me, his best friend, to do something like that without telling me why?"

"Some best friend," Albus said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "First you betray him and his family, and then you leave Harry to suffer."

"I never betrayed my friend, and I would never have done anything to hurt Harry," Sirius snapped, his anger flaring up again.

"But by killing Pettigrew you did hurt him," Albus countered, placing the blame on Sirius for Harry's living arrangement. "Because of what you did, Harry had to grow up with his aunt."

"Petunia?" Sirius asked in shock.

"He didn't have any other aunts."

"But she loathed magic and treated Lily as if she had some sort of communicable disease," Sirius said, his voice reflecting his disgust. "Who in their right mind would have sent my godson to live with that harridan?"

"It was in Harry's best interests," Albus said emphatically, still believing he had made the right choice for the wizarding world and for himself.

"You son of a bitch!" Sirius barked out, his fingers turning white as he gripped the bars as he realized who had sent Harry to live with Petunia. "She would have made his life a living hell." Sirius caught the flinch Albus made. "And she did, didn't she?"

An Auror who had been a witness at the trial, who had come in unnoticed and caught the end of the conversation, guffawed loudly. "Too right she did. And that's why 'e's in 'ere."

Albus scowled angrily at the man. "I can speak for myself."

The Auror shrugged. "I came to tell ya that your appeal date 'as been set for two years from now, coz that's when your sentence for escaping comes to an end. An' I said I'd give ya these." He handed over a cup, a spoon, and a basin, as well as two uniforms, a toothbrush, a tube of toothpaste, a threadbare towel, a bar of soap, and a roll of scratchy, hard toilet paper.

"So you tried to escape, did you?" Sirius asked, not bothering to hide his amusement at the horrified look on Dumbledore's face at the items he had just been given.

The Auror, who had yet to leave, provided the answer when Dumbledore failed to do so. "Yeah, 'e did. That's why 'e's wearing the pretty bracelet."

Sirius had noticed the cuff on Dumbledore's left wrist. "What is it?"

"That's nothing to do with you," Albus said, before he directed his next comment at the Auror. "You can get out now you've done what you came to do."

The Auror smirked. "I'll leave when I'm good and ready." He then turned to Sirius. "It stops 'im from doing magic. They were gonna take 'is magic away until 'arry Potter said about the cuff. But if 'e messes up, then they'll take 'is magic then." Being a former Slytherin and a member of a house that the Auror always felt that Dumbledore had never liked, the Auror took great delight in telling Sirius about Albus' punishment. "And then they sent 'im down for almost twelve years, and..." Before he could go on, a call saying that the boat was waiting to take him back to the mainland ended his speech. Not wanting to be left behind, the Auror gave Albus one last smug look. "I'm sure the time will fly for yeh."

Sirius watched the Auror leave before commenting, "I'd have let them drain you dry of your magic, but obviously Harry is far kinder than I am."

"Kinder?" Albus almost spat the word at the Sirius. "Harry was far from kind. He not only asked them to drain my magic if I do anything wrong while I'm in here, but he also got them to increase my sentence to ten years."

"Plus the two I take it for escaping?"

"Obviously!"

Sirius smirked. "It couldn't have happened to a nicer person."

"Fuck you, Black!"

"I see those true colors shining through now," Sirius said, his voice full of glee. "It's a little different when the shoe is on the other foot, isn't it, Dumbledore? But at least you got the chance to plead your case, something I never did."

"You didn't deserve it," Albus snapped.

"And Harry didn't deserve to be placed with a woman who makes vipers look friendly," Sirius snapped back, his glee dissipating as his anger returned.

"And James didn't deserve to be betrayed by you," Albus said in return. "But he was, and Harry had to live with Petunia because of it."

Sirius knew he could argue until he was blue in the face, and Dumbledore would still believe that Sirius had been the one to betray the Potters, so he let that part of the discussion slide, but he still had plenty to say about Harry's placement. "There must have been plenty of wizarding families who would have taken Harry in."

"It was in Harry's best interests in to live with his aunt. There were blood wards..."

Sirius imitated Albus' earlier snort. "Blood wards? We both know what a waste of time they are."

"I disagree," Albus said. "Harry was best protected by living with the closest relative who shared his mother's blood..."

"Bullshit!" Sirius said crudely. "Grimmauld Place had some of the most potent blood wards in the country on it and it didn't stop anyone from hurting me. My mother, my father, my aunt, my brother, my cousin..."

"I get your supposed point," Albus interjected.

Sirius disagreed. "There's no supposed about it. Harry could have lived with any family in the wizarding world who had good standard wards around their home. So why with Petunia?" Sirius gave Albus no chance to answer as he answered for him. "I think I know. It was because you thought he'd be so pathetically grateful to you for rescuing him from the shithole you dumped him in that he'd do anything you asked of him."

"That's not true." Albus denied Sirius' allegation. "Harry needed to grow up free from the adoration..."

Sirius barked out a laugh. "Adoration? I bet Harry would rather have put up with the attention than with his aunt's ministrations."

"Harry doesn't like the limelight," Albus countered.

"I'm willing to bet if he had to choose, he'd pick the limelight over mistreatment," Sirius said quite rightly. "So tell me, Dumbledore, what happened to make Harry turn against you?"

"Your pet werewolf persuaded him to bring a case against me," Albus snapped, angrily throwing the items he had just been given onto what passed as a bed.

Sirius grinned. "Not so nice about Remus now, are you? I bet it must really grate on your very last nerve to know that Harry thinks more of a werewolf than he does the illustrious Headmaster of Hogwarts."

"If he's even been honest with the boy; it's not as if he's bothered registering with the Ministry. If I could find a way around my oath to him, Lupin would be in here with us now for his omission," Albus barked out, all pretence at civility gone. "It's not fair that that half-breed is running around free and gussying up to Harry, while someone decent like me, who only had Harry's best interests at heart, is locked up."

Sirius had always suspected that Albus was not quite as friendly towards Remus as he had always pretended to be. "So if you think so little of Remus, then why did you let him join Hogwarts?"

"That's none of your business," Albus responded, not willing to tell Sirius that he had been using Remus' blood in an elixir, which was supposed to induce longevity. He had taken the blood when Remus had been recovering after the night of the full moon to use in the elixir, and he still had stocks of it hidden, not that it would do him any good now.

"So it was obviously for something that benefitted you," Sirius guessed, although he had no idea what.

"I wouldn't tell you if it had."

"Just like you wouldn't tell anyone where you'd hidden my godson," Sirius countered. He smirked at the look of surprise on Albus' face. "Just because I'm behind bars doesn't mean I don't know what's going on."

"How?" Albus asked, wondering how on earth a high security prisoner who was not supposed to have any visitors had managed to glean information about the outside world.

"That's for me to know and you to guess," Sirius said in a sing-song voice, and although he knew he was being childish, it gave him great satisfaction to know he had managed to irritate Dumbledore.

"It's doesn't take a genius," Albus came back after a moment's thought. "Some prick like that Auror, no doubt."

Sirius tutted. "Such language. I wonder what the wizarding world would think if they could see the real you. You let the world think that you're this do-gooder who has everyone's best interests at heart, when in reality you're a self-serving sanctimonious arsehole who is only out for himself. And even though the very sight of you sickens me, it makes me feel warm inside to know that Remus encouraged Harry to do the right thing and have you prosecuted so that you ended up here."

Albus thought differently. "They were wrong to do it. Everything I've done has been for the greater good, although no-one seems to understand that."

"I don't blame them," Sirius said, letting the disgust he felt for the former headmaster show in his voice yet again. "I just wish they had

sentenced you to stay here forever, although I doubt you'll be sane enough to notice how long it's been in a few months' time. The former occupant of your cell lasted six weeks before he stopped eating, and another few days before he died. Let's see how long you survive. It's not as if you're a spring chicken, is it?"

It was only then that it occurred to Albus that Sirius, although very drawn and thin, was most definitely still sane. "Why haven't you gone mad?"

"Because I have something to live for." Sirius then turned away as he heard the clang that signaled the release of the Dementors. Whenever a new prisoner was brought in, it was standard practice to give them a 'warm-up' session almost immediately.

Albus watched Sirius disappear from view below the lower stone half of the prison cell, the bars only forming windows and doors, giving the prisoners some privacy to perform their natural bodily functions. Suddenly he felt a chill, and he shivered.

Transformed into a black dog, Sirius lay in relative safety, protected from the worst of the effects of the Dementors. He wondered just how well Albus would cope. His doggy face transformed into what could only be described as a smile when, a short time later he heard a thump and moaning. Sirius knew only too well from experience that if he was in human form, then it was better to lie down, but he was damned if he was going to share this lesson with Dumbledore. The irritating old bastard would have to find it out for himself.

Two Days Later

Harry followed Remus up the corridor to Amelia's office, where she was waiting for them. "Harry, Mr. Lupin. I was expecting Mrs. Weasley."

"Molly and I talked it over, and as Harry's alternate guardian we decided that it was better that I accompany him, as we will be returning to my home afterwards for Harry to spend the remainder of his holiday with me," Remus said, hiding his pleasure at thwarting Amelia.

Amelia could say little in argument as the Wizengamot had made their ruling and she had to follow it, even if she disagreed with it. "Then let's adjourn to Mrs. Dursley's holding cell."

Although he was nervous about seeing his aunt, Harry still met her gaze when he walked into the cell where his aunt was sitting opposite the door, a table and chair separating her from him. She looked at Harry with no anger, which surprised Harry. In fact if Harry could have put a name to the look on Petunia's face, he would have said it was more curiosity than anything else. She gave a very lazy smile. "Come to gloat, Harry?"

Not really knowing what to say, Harry ignored her comment. Standing next to Harry, Remus was surprised by the difference in Petunia, and he wondered if it was just an act. He was about to find out as Tiberius Ogden entered the room. "Mr. Potter, Mr. Lupin, Madam Bones." He then addressed Petunia. "Mrs. Dursley, this is as you probably know, Veritaserum..."

Petunia halted his speech, raising a hand to stop him from speaking. "I don't want it. Nothing can change what's about to happen to me. I know I'm going to die."

Remus could feel absolute certainty coming from Petunia, as Tiberius again offered up the Veritaserum. "As part of the terms of your sentence, I have to administer the Veritaserum. If you don't take it willingly, then you will be forced to do so." He put the vial on the table.

Petunia picked up the vial from the table where Tiberius had placed it, and uncorking it, she dropped the tiny amount onto her tongue. Her eyes clouded over before she looked normal again. "As I've just said, it's too late for me. I'm going to die."

Tiberius had never seen anyone act so resigned before. "Do you regret hurting your nephew?"

"Yes, but not because I hurt him," Petunia said.

"What do you mean?" Harry blurted out, Petunia's words not making sense.

"I should have been kinder to everyone, not just you, Harry. It would have saved me, and no matter what I say or do now, it's too late," Petunia said.

Tiberius, like the others, was rather confused. "Why is it too late? If you genuinely regret your actions against your nephew, then your sentence will be commuted."

"That's never going to happen. It's my time to die," Petunia declared. "Let's just get this over with."

Despite her words, as mandated by his own order, Tiberius still had to ensure that Petunia did not truly regret her actions. "So for the record, you're stating that you don't regret hurting your nephew because it was morally the wrong thing to do, but you do regret it because you're going to die?"

"Yes," Petunia said firmly.

"Then I have no other choice but to carry out the sentence I imposed in the Court," Tiberius said, his voice carrying not one ounce of regret as he truly believed that Petunia deserved her fate.

Petunia met Harry's gaze. "I imagine you're going to enjoy watching this, aren't you?"

Amelia immediately turned to Harry. "No-one except for two Aurors and Chief Justice Ogden will be witnessing the procedure of the Kiss, Harry. And I wouldn't allow you to bear witness to it, even if you wanted to. However, you are entitled to accompany us to the Death Chamber to witness the final part of the sentence."

Harry squared up his shoulders as he looked at his aunt, who was smirking at him. "Then I want to witness it."

"I told you he'd want to watch," Petunia said. "It's in his blood."

"No, it's not. I'm nothing like you!" Harry ground out.

"I didn't say you were," Petunia countered. "Just that it's in your blood, and that you're going to enjoy watching me die."

Remus stepped in between Petunia and Harry. "You're one sick lady if you think that. And Harry is right, he's nothing like you."

Petunia seemed totally unaffected by Remus' comments. "And yet he wants to watch them push me through the archway to my death."

Watching was actually the last thing Harry wanted to do, but he needed to do it, to know that finally he would be out of reach of his aunt. And so he stepped around Remus to make it clear why he was doing what he was. "No, I'm only watching because I want to know it's over."

Remus could feel Harry's swirling emotions, and he offered to take Harry's place. "Harry, I don't think witnessing your aunt's death is a good idea. I'll witness it for you."

Harry wavered until he glanced again at Petunia, who gave him a knowing smile, and he glared at her. "No, I have to do this myself."

"Then we should all head to the Death Chamber," Amelia said, and she reluctantly included Remus in her invitation. "Mr. Lupin, even though Harry has refused your attendance in his place, you may still attend as Harry's alternate guardian if you so choose."

"I do," Remus said, there being no way he was going to leave Harry alone to face something like this. He tried one last time. "Harry, please let me do this for you."

"No," Harry said, not wanting to be afraid anymore.

"Then let's adjourn," Tiberius said.

The Death Chamber

Harry looked around the chamber, which had stone seating around three sides of it and steps leading up to an archway where a ragged curtain fluttered as if in a light breeze. He then looked at the screen that had been set up at the base of the archway. "What's that for?"

"The actual procedure will take place behind it, so that you and everyone else who doesn't need to, doesn't have to witness the Kiss," Amelia explained.

Ten Aurors then came into the room, Petunia in the middle of them. After escorting her to stand in front of the screen, they moved to stand five abreast on each side of the screen, their wands drawn.

Tiberius approached Petunia. "Petunia Marie Dursley, do you have any final words before the sentence is carried out?"

"Yes," Petunia said, and she turned to look at Harry. "Child of prophecy, your hands are awash with blood, and you will bring this world to its knees."

Having heard similar words said to him by the centaurs, Harry recoiled against Remus, who placed a steadying hand on each shoulder. "What do you mean by that?"

"I have said everything I'm going to, Lupin," Petunia said. "Shall we get on with this?"

Remus was more than a little confused by Petunia's behavior. Two days earlier she had been dragged out of the courtroom kicking and screaming, and now she was almost belligerently accepting of her fate. "Why are you in such a hurry to die?"

"I'm not," Petunia responded. "But I'm also not going to explain myself to you. Not unless you want everyone here knowing your deepest darkest secret."

Remus just knew that somehow Petunia knew what he was, although he could never have imagined Lily telling her, and he had no idea how she could know. But not willing to take the chance, he immediately backed off. "You win."

"I thought I might," Petunia said, a tiny smirk playing across her lips, and she turned to Tiberius Ogden. "I'm ready."

Tiberius read out the death sentence. "Petunia Marie Dursley, for crimes committed against Harry James Potter, you have been found guilty and condemned to death, such sentence to be carried out forthwith." He then turned to the head Auror. "Bring in the Dementor."

Amelia turned to Harry and Remus. "I suggest you take Harry over there and put up a silencing spell."

Remus led Harry away to the furthest corner of the room, and he then cast a privacy spell.

"Have you seen this happen before?" Harry asked, his voice shaking, and he shivered, feeling strangely cold.

"No," Remus said, and he also shivered. "But as part of my job, I have heard someone go through this before, and it's not nice."

"How did she know what the centaurs said to me?" Harry asked, moving on, trying to ignore the strange sensation he was experiencing.

Remus shook his head. "I honestly have no idea, but I think it's more than likely that she was just trying to upset you and picked on those words by mere coincidence."

"Do you really think that?" Harry pressed, remembering Remus' promise to be honest with Harry.

"Yes, I can't think of any other reason for her to have said it," Remus said, although he too had been stunned to hear such words coming from Petunia.

"Then how does she know about the prophecy?"

"Dumbledore was the person who heard it," Remus told him. "He probably told her."

"And how does she know about you?"

"Lily knew what I was but given that she and Petunia barely spoke after Lily's fifth year, I don't see how she could have found out," Remus said. "Or maybe Petunia knew nothing and was just trying to unnerve me, I don't know. Either way, she won't be telling anyone anything anymore."

Harry wanted to look over his shoulder but despite his earlier show of courage in standing up to his aunt, he was too afraid to look. "Do you think it's over?"

Remus had set the privacy bubble so that he could still hear, even though Harry could not, and he could hear the tortured rasping sound coming from the Dementor as it consumed its meal of Petunia's soul. "Not quite."

"You can hear?"

Remus nodded. "Yes, this isn't a full powered privacy bubble." After a few moments, he dropped the spell, and he turned around just as the screen was dropped. "You can turn around now."

Slowly rotating, Harry gave a residual shiver as he watched the door close behind a large black cloaked creature. Once the Dementor had left, Harry could not help but stare at his aunt, who was being lifted up off the floor by two Aurors. Harry noticed that Petunia's eyes had rolled back in her head and she was drooling as she was manhandled up the stairs by the two Aurors until the trio was facing the archway.

Tiberius nodded at the pointed look he received. "Complete the sentence."

Despite his horror, Harry was fascinated as Petunia was pushed forward. She seemed to hang in mid-air for a long moment before she was slowly sucked into the archway and she vanished. "Is that her voice I can hear?"

Everyone turned to look at Harry, Amelia asking, "You can hear voices?"

Harry nodded. "Like whispering."

"In that case I think it's time we left," Amelia declared, being well aware of documented cases where Aurors and spectators alike had tried to, and in some cases had succeeded, in jumping through the archway.

"I have to be honest," Tiberius said, as the group all left the elevator, which had returned them to the Atrium. "Despite your aunt's obvious goading, I didn't expect you to see it through to the end, Harry."

"I wasn't going to," Harry said truthfully. "But I needed to see that she was gone, and I didn't want my aunt to know I was afraid."

"An act of bravado then," Tiberius noted. "But quite unnecessary. Your aunt is now dead and can never hurt you again. And speaking of which, Amelia, can I rely on you to complete the paperwork?"

"You can," Amelia said. "Harry, do you want anything to eat or drink before you return home?"

Harry shook his head, the thought of food the last thing on his mind. "No, thanks."

"Then I think that concludes our business," Amelia said. "I'm afraid I have meetings to attend. If you will excuse me." She nodded politely and then departed.

"I also have business to attend to," Tiberius announced, "but I will be in touch about Mr. Dursley and the blood wards within a few days."

"Harry is actually staying with me until the end of the Easter holidays," Remus informed him.

"Then I will send an owl to you, Mr. Lupin." Unlike Amelia, Tiberius shook hands with both Harry and Remus and left.

Harry glanced around as they walked away from the elevators. "Are we going to see the prophecy today?"

Remus shook his head. "Unfortunately with everything that's happened, I haven't had a chance to sort things out, and I'm afraid it will have to wait until the summer holidays. And to be honest, I think you've had enough to deal with."

Harry decided that Remus was right. "So are we going to your house?"

"Yes," Remus told Harry, and he led him to the apparition area of the Ministry. "Hold tight."

Harry spent a pleasant day with Remus talking about his parents again, but as he had done on the first night he had stayed with Remus, he once again had horrendous nightmares, and Remus ended up spending a good deal of the night sitting up with Harry and

talking to him. Then the same happened again the next night, and the one after that.

Three Days Later

Remus handed Harry a pepper-up potion. "You look terrible, Harry."

"I wish I'd never witnessed my aunt's execution," Harry admitted, his face grey and his voice full of misery.

"I can obliviate you," Remus offered, as he had done the previous three nights, already having received permission to do so from Ogden should it become necessary. He had also offered dreamless sleep potion but Harry had refused, scared that somehow he would still dream and be locked inside his nightmares unable to wake up.

The nightmares were really taking a toll on Harry, and although the idea of losing his memories frightened him, Harry had had enough. His head hurt, his throat was sore from screaming, and he was so tired he felt as though he could cry. "Okay."

"Give me the potion back," Remus said. "You should be able to get some sleep after I've done this."

Harry handed over the potion. "It won't hurt, will it?"

"You won't even know it's happened," Remus said, as he withdrew his wand. Not giving Harry a chance to change his mind, he aimed his wand at Harry. "Oblivate."

Harry blinked several times. "Sorry, I must have drifted off."

"You said you didn't sleep well," Remus said truthfully. "Why don't you go back to bed?"

Harry yawned. "I think I will."

Harry slept until two, when Remus woke him. "Harry, it's time for lunch."

"I'm up," Harry said sleepily, but he had to force himself to get out of bed.

When he padded into the dining area he discovered bowls of tomato soup, toasted cheese sandwiches, and creamy milk were awaiting him. He sniffed appreciatively. "I'm starving."

Remus was glad to see that Harry's appetite had returned, and he encouraged him to eat all he could. While Harry had slept, Remus had written to Amelia Bones, and fire called Tiberius Ogden and the Weasleys to inform them of what he had done to Harry. Tiberius had actually taken the time to drop by to let Remus know that he thought he had made the right decision, and to inform Remus of his decision about Dudley Dursley.

When Harry had finally finished eating, Remus began to relay what had been decided. "I spoke to Tiberius Ogden today about the blood wards and the Dursleys."

Harry sat up straighter, his look hopeful. "And?"

"The expert said that although you were protected by the blood wards to some degree, given their obvious limitations, he doesn't believe it would be of any benefit to you to return to Privet Drive," Remus explained. "Therefore Dudley has been obliviated, and he'll be given his second chance in the Muggle world. And you don't have to go back to Privet Drive."

Harry burst into tears, surprising both himself and Remus. Remus got up and tugged Harry up so that he could hug him. "It's been a rough few weeks, hasn't it?"

Harry nodded into Remus' shoulder, grasping tightly to Remus' shirt as he sobbed. Remus did not try to hush Harry up and instead let him cry it out. When he had calmed down, Harry wiped his eyes. "I don't even know why I was crying."

"Relief," Remus said, easily able to connect an emotion to the act. "It's finally over for you. The Dursleys are no longer a threat."

"Has Marge been obliviated?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Remus nodded. "According to Ogden, Marjorie Dursley wanted to be free of our world as quickly as possible, and so she took out a second mortgage on her home to pay you, which was granted this morning, and the obliviation team has led her to believe

that she lost the money gambling. She also believes you and the rest of the Dursleys are dead."

Harry was glad to hear that he would never have to face the odious woman again. "Good! But what if she runs into Dudley?"

"There's a spell in place on both of them to ensure that they won't recognize each other," Remus said, passing on what he and Ogden had discussed while Harry had been sleeping. "And Dudley has a new identity and has been placed in a Muggle orphanage in Leeds, far away from Marjorie. I just hope he takes the chance he's been given."

Harry hoped so too but he doubted it. "At least I'll never have to put up with him again or go back to Privet Drive."

"You won't. It's up for sale," Remus said. "Once it's been sold, all the profits will be placed in your vault at Gringotts. You don't have to do anything, so effectively your dealings with the Dursleys are now over."

Harry felt as though a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders but he had a question for Remus. "What do I do about McGonagall?"

"I can tell you already feel differently about her from the way you're calling her 'McGonagall'," Remus said.

"I don't trust her anymore, and I'm not even sure I like her now." Harry repeated what he had already told Remus. "But I'm not sure how to deal with her at school."

"Just treat her as you would any other teacher," Remus advised. "After her speech in the courtroom, I'll doubt she'll try and force you to converse with her should you choose not to."

"Good, because I don't want to," Harry said as he sat down. "I wish I could start again."

"If you speak French or Russian you can," Remus said.

Harry shook his head. "I can't run away, and my friends are at Hogwarts, but I have to admit that I'm not looking forward to going back on Sunday."

"I'll tell you what then," Remus said, sitting down beside Harry. "It's a bit late to do anything today. But tomorrow we're going to go out for the day and try to forget about everything that has happened, take in a movie, go to a museum, whatever you want to do."

Harry knew of somewhere he wanted to go to more than a museum. "I've never been to the seaside."

"Then that's where we'll go," Remus promised.

Three days later

At the front of the Great Hall, Minerva stood up and asked for quiet. When all went silent, she began to speak. "Courtesy of the Daily Prophet, you will all be aware by now of Albus Dumbledore's trial and his subsequent sentencing. I am now Headmistress of Hogwarts, and Professor Flitwick has kindly agreed to take up my former Deputy duties. I will, at least for the time being, also be continuing to teach Transfiguration. However, due to the workload that I now have, exams for Transfiguration will now only be held for fifth and seventh years. All other years will not have to take Transfiguration exams."

Harry grinned, able to hear Hermione's groan all the way from the Gryffindor table. He then turned his attention back to Minerva. "Also, you will have read about the Philosopher's Stone being kept at the school. This has now been removed, as has the Cerberus that once lived on the third floor. This floor is therefore no longer out of bounds."

"What about the Forest?"

Minerva responded negatively to the fourth year Slytherin. "That will always be out of bounds. And there will also be a curfew in place from now until you leave for the summer holidays. No pupil will be allowed outside alone at any time, and no pupils, no matter how great their numbers, will be allowed outside after dark."

"Why?"

Given Dumbledore's secretive nature, Minerva had decided to try to be as different from him as she could, and this meant being as open as possible with the pupils. "A pupil was almost killed in the Forbidden Forest by someone who has been killing unicorns. We have yet to apprehend this person, and although they may have now left the area, I am not willing to risk any student if they have not done so. As you may have noticed as you came in, there are Aurors in attendance at Hogwarts, and a guard will remain until the summer arrives."

"What about Hogsmeade?"

"All visits will be strictly monitored by teachers," Minerva responded, to be greeted by groans. "If you do not wish to attend with a teacher, then you won't attend at all."

The grumbling died down, and Minerva made her final announcement. "If anyone wishes to discuss anything that has happened, then please make an appointment to see me or their head of house to talk about it. I do not wish to hear about any pupils harassing Harry Potter or any of his friends for information. Should I hear that anyone has disobeyed me, they will be suspended for one week, no exceptions."

Harry cringed a little as everyone looked at him. However, after his experience on the train ride back to school, where it had felt as though he had been on display, with what had seemed like half the school traipsing past his carriage to peer in, he was rather pleased by Minerva's edict.

Minerva's edict did make Harry's life easier, and she stuck to her word, as Draco Malfoy discovered when he had pestered Harry about the trial a few days after the Easter holidays.

Next Chapter: Hagrid is discovered to be hiding something; Harry makes use of the Hufflepuff tunnel.

Have a great holiday weekend!

Chapter 18: Dragon

Although it seemed like forever since Harry and Justin had discussed Justin's chances at quidditch, in the end the two of them finally managed to get some time to spend outside so that Justin could use Harry's broomstick.

Justin climbed off Harry's broom, his face glowing with excitement. "That was brilliant, Harry."

"I told you that you would be good." Harry span around as his name was called. "Ron, what's up?"

"It's Hagrid." Ron was panting heavily, having run back from the groundskeeper's hut, Neville coming up close behind him. "I think he's up to no good. I dropped by because I wanted to see how Scabbers was doing, and..."

"Scabbers?" Harry queried the name.

"My pet rat," Ron reminded Harry. "I showed him to you on Boxing Day."

Harry faintly recalled a rat that had been in a cage at the back of Ron's bedroom, the cage balanced precariously on Ron's dirty laundry basket. "Oh, yeah."

Ron then went on. "Anyway, ever since Christmas he's gone off his food, and he's been getting thinner and thinner. I thought that perhaps Hagrid could help, and so Hagrid has been looking after Scabbers to see if he can get him to eat. But when I tried to get Hagrid to let me in to see Scabbers, he barely opened the door, and the place inside was like an inferno."

"Perhaps he's cold," Harry suggested.

"Hagrid feeling the cold? I doubt that." Justin had seen the big man in his shirt sleeves in the snow. "I bet he's hiding something."

"He is. When I kept trying to look around him, he tried to block my vision, and I couldn't see what was inside," Ron said. "Well, not till Fang knocked something over and Hagrid turned around."

"What did Fang knock over?" Harry asked, more than a little intrigued.

"The pot was that balancing on the side of the fireplace." Ron had used the diversion to slip by Hagrid into his hut. "And guess what was in the pot."

Harry hazarded a stab at the pot's contents. "His dinner?"

"No, an egg." Ron's voice was full of excitement.

Justin was totally unable to understand why Ron was so animated about something as simple as an egg. "But couldn't that have been his dinner?"

"Not unless he's eating a dragon's egg," Ron announced triumphantly. "I've seen them before when Charlie brought home some books on dragons. Hagrid has a dragon's egg."

"That's insane." But even as he said it, Harry could not help but remember that his overly large friend desired a dragon.

"I know. He can't keep a dragon in his hut." Ron knew a lot about them from Charlie. "And I'm almost sure that that was definitely a Romanian Longhorn, and they grow to be huge."

"Wasn't that the type of egg that was stolen from Charlie's reserve?" Harry asked.

Ron was almost sure it was. "Yeah, but I don't think Hagrid would have taken it."

"Neither do I." Harry then sat quietly as he thought over the problem. He did not want to 'tell' on Hagrid but he also knew that with all good conscience he was unable to ignore the problem either.

Neville broke into Harry's thoughts. "We should go to a teacher."

Harry disagreed. "I don't want to do that. I think we have to get Hagrid to go to McGonagall and tell her about the dragon's egg himself."

"Dragon's egg?" Hermione asked, having only just arrived from the library together with Susan.

Ron filled the two girls in on what he had discovered. "So Harry thinks we should try and get Hagrid to go to the Headmistress."

"I agree with Harry then," Hermione declared, flashing Harry a bright smile. "I'll come with you and speak to Hagrid if you want."

"So will I," Susan piped up.

So it was decided that Harry, Susan, and Hermione would go and speak to Hagrid to try and talk some sense into the man. While they did so, Justin and Ron took turns practicing on Harry's broom, leaving Neville to sit and watch Ron and Justin encouraging each other to go faster.

A fed up Neville, who wanted to leave but was unable to go anywhere alone thanks to McGonagall's decree, was thoroughly relieved when the three children returned from trying to speak to Hagrid.

However, Harry had to admit to defeat. "I tried to persuade him to tell McGonagall but he's refusing. He said he won it fair and square in a card game just before Easter and he's going to hatch it."

"Then what are we going to do?" Neville asked. "Hagrid can't be allowed to keep that egg. If he won't go to McGonagall, then we should do it."

Harry immediately shook his head. "No way. I don't want to get Hagrid into trouble."

It was Susan who came up with a sensible suggestion. "Why don't you or Ron write to Charlie and tell him about the egg? If it's the egg that was taken from his dragon then perhaps he can help us."

"Harry can do it," Ron said immediately, not being a great lover of letter writing.

When all the children but Neville, who still believed that they should tell a teacher, agreed on this course of action, Harry headed inside to pen a letter to Charlie.

Charlie grabbed the letter he had received from Harry and headed to see the woman in charge of the reserve. "Tula, I have a problem."

Tula put down the burn paste she had just finished applying to her hand and listened to Charlie's tale. "You believe that this Hagrid stole the egg?"

"While I'm only guessing that this is the same egg that was stolen from Dravina, I know for certain that Hagrid would never have done it." Charlie held up the letter Harry had written. "And I believe that what Harry wrote, that Hagrid won the egg off a stranger in the pub, is the truth. And that our mysterious stranger..." Here Charlie looked back at the letter "...who kept their face covered, was the one who stole the egg."

"Then I suggest we go collect our egg before it hatches," Tula decided.

As it turned out they were too late. Harry received a brief note from Hagrid later that day to say that the egg was hatching, and he shared the news with his friends, all of them deciding to visit Hagrid to see what the dragon looked like.

After lessons Harry and his friends all piled into Hagrid's hut to observe the miniature dragon that was trying to blow smoke. Hermione watched from a distance. "It's hard to believe that he will grow up to be so frightening."

"Yeah, but he's sort of cute right now." Harry tickled the dragon under the chin making it sneeze and blow minute flames towards him, before it stumbled across the wooden table top to move even closer to Harry.

Ron brushed away the sparks that had landed on his arm. "It's not cute when you're on fire though."

"Little fella doesn't mean any 'arm," Hagrid said, as he watched the dragon rubbing its head against Harry's hand, just like a cat would.

Harry tickled the dragon's tummy as it rolled over. "What's his name?"

Hagrid gave a contented sigh as the dragon blew little smoke rings and made a gentle rumbling noise at Harry's ministrations. "Roger."

"Roger?" Neville could not believe he had heard right. "You're calling a vicious dragon 'Roger'?"

"Roger's not vicious." Hagrid cooed at the dragon, which surprisingly seemed to like the sound and made small clicking sounds in his throat as he snuggled closer to Harry, having rolled back over onto its feet.

"I think he thinks that you're his mother, Harry." Ron could see that the baby dragon was not in the slightest bit frightened of Harry, and instead it seemed to be reveling in the close contact.

This alarmed Harry a little. "I hope not. If anyone was his mother, I'd say it was Hagrid." He gently nudged the dragon back towards Hagrid. "Off you go."

"Who's a good boy?" Hagrid said as he reached out and picked up the small dragon, tucking it under his arm and briskly rubbing its belly, causing it to make the small clicking noises again, before it closed its eyes, little puffs of smoke coming from its nostrils as it slipped into a deep sleep.

"How big will he grow?" Susan asked.

"Not too big," Hagrid said, although he went red as he said it.

"But when he gets bigger, he might hurt someone," Neville said. "I think we should tell one of the teachers."

Hagrid took umbrage at Neville's comment. "Roger would never hurt anyone."

Neville winced when Harry flashed him a look that said 'shut up' as the other children continued to observe the now sleeping Roger. Neville had almost forgotten about the letter Harry had written and its subsequent response. Deciding that it would be better to let Hagrid enjoy his final few days with Roger, Neville subsided.

Four Days Later

Harry was woken up by Hedwig pecking his shoulder. "Geroff."

Hedwig ignored Harry's order and continued pecking him. Harry sat up. "What is it?" Hedwig nudged Harry softly, reminding him it was time to get up, and in turn Harry did the same to his friend. "Justin, Justin, wake up."

"Too early." Justin rolled over and attempted to bury himself under the covers.

Climbing out of bed to pull on his clothes, Harry turned to his familiar. "Hedwig, wake Justin up."

Justin's slumber came to an abrupt end when a sharp beak connected with the tender skin of his neck. "I'm up. I'm up."

Hedwig gave a strangled cry in a manner that could only be described as a laugh before she flew off towards the hole where she had gained access. Harry laced up his boots. "It's time to go. The note said that Charlie would be here at midnight, and it's almost that now."

Justin's sleepiness fled and he hurried to get dressed. "Don't go without me."

"I'd have left you sleeping if I was going to do that." Harry waited impatiently for Justin to finish, and then both boys rushed out of the dormitory leaving their two still sleeping roommates behind. Susan was waiting for them outside of their door and together they headed out of Hufflepuff to find Ron standing by the entrance to school.

Once they reached Hagrid's hut, Harry hung back shyly as Ron greeted his brother. His shyness vanished when he too was pulled into a bear hug. "Hi, Charlie."

Charlie was not happy to see Ron or Harry despite his warm greeting. "What are you doing out of bed? I told you in the letter that we would handle it."

"We wanted to see you," Harry said, his voice subdued.

"You've seen me, now get back to bed," Charlie ordered. "It's not safe out here."

"But you're here," Ron argued.

"That's because I can take care of myself," Charlie argued. "Now off to bed. We need to get a look at this egg."

It was then that Harry noticed the woman standing in the shadows, and she moved forward. "We can escort them back once we have the egg." She smiled at the boys in the dim light. "I'm Tula Buscan."

Harry politely held out his hand. "Hi, I'm Harry Potter. And this is Charlie's brother, Ron."

The woman's eyebrows rose up as she shook hands with both boys, and she commented on the discovery of who Charlie was friends with. "Charlie, you didn't tell me that 'Harry' was actually Harry Potter."

"I didn't think it was important." Charlie knew how much Harry would be pleased to hear that.

Harry was. "This isn't about me. It's about Hagrid and the baby dragon."

"Baby dragon?" Tula realized that their prize was no longer just an egg. "When did it hatch?"

"Four days ago," Ron revealed. "Hagrid called it Roger."

"We'd better go see Hagrid alone." Unaware that the boys had already seen the dragon, Charlie decided that he wanted them back in bed, and not in the range of a dragon, not even a baby one. "You two head back to your houses, and don't dawdle."

"But can't we come with you?" Harry wanted to spend more time with Charlie.

"You're not supposed to be here, and I want you safely back inside." Charlie was firm. "Now off to bed."

The boys' departure was halted as Susan and Justin, who had agreed to keep watch, suddenly came hurrying down the hill, Susan's face full of alarm. "McGonagall's coming!"

Ron looked around him in a panic. "We can't go back up the hill or into the Forest."

"The bushes," Harry barked out. "Quick. See you, Charlie."

Charlie was left behind as Ron gave his brother a wave and followed Harry and the two Hufflepuffs towards the bushes that grew close to the entrance to the school.

The four children reached the safety of the bushes with moments to spare, and Harry could hear McGonagall's voice drifting over to him in the night as he desperately searched the bushes in the dark, not daring to light up his wand. Suddenly his hand brushed over a square stone. He just hoped it was the badger decal, and he hurriedly touched his wand to it, whispering, "Loyalty above all else."

To the four children the grating sound of the stone sounded horribly loud in the night, but they all piled into the tunnel, Harry activating the door closure mechanism as soon as they were inside. Then he lit up his wand. "We have to hurry."

Ron glanced around him as he ran. "This is wicked. I thought we were just going to hide in the bushes. How did you find this place?"

Justin answered him. "Remus Lupin told him about it."

"Where does it go to?"

"Our dormitories," Susan said, her voice sounding a little breathless as she tried to keep up with the longer legged boys.

Harry remembered Remus' warning about being careful who he trusted. And although Harry felt he could now trust Ron, he was not willing to extend that trust to Neville. "But you have to keep it a secret. You can't tell anyone, not even Neville."

Ron was too thrilled to be included in the tunnel's secret to care about the proviso. "I promise I won't say a word."

Once they reached the blank wall, Harry again touched his wand to the decal of the badger and uttered the password. He was just glad

no-one was around as the four children slipped out. "You'll have to head back to your dormitory from here."

"But what about if I run into McGonagall?" Ron asked in a worried voice.

The three Hufflepuffs looked at each other, none of them really having the answer. Susan, however, did have another question. "What do you think she was doing out there?"

The answer suddenly occurred to Harry. "I bet she was looking for you, Ron."

"She must have found me out of bed." Ron was now even closer to panicking. "What am I going to do?"

Justin came up with the answer. "Go to the hospital wing and say that you feel unwell. You can explain why it took you so long to get there if anyone asks by saying you stopped at the boys' toilets to be sick."

"But I'll get dosed up with some disgusting potion." Ron had had this happen already after eating too much leftover candy from Halloween.

"It's better than the alternative," Harry told him. "If McGonagall finds we snuck out, then I bet she'll suspend all of us for breaking curfew and for breaking the rule about not leaving the school after dark."

Ron sighed in defeat as he realized that Harry was right. "Which way do I go?"

"I'll show you but let's use my cloak," Harry suggested, and after popping back into his bedroom to get it, he slipped it around himself and Ron. "Susan, Justin, get to bed. If I do get caught, if you're in bed, at least you won't get into trouble."

However, the two boys met no-one as Harry managed to get Ron to just outside of the infirmary without any bother. "You'd better go in."

"I'll see you tomorrow then," Ron said in a resigned voice before heading into the infirmary.

Not wanting to get caught out of bed, Harry hurried back to Hufflepuff to find that Justin was still awake. "He got there okay."

"Then get undressed and into bed," Justin hissed urgently, making sure he kept his voice low so as not to wake up the other two boys in their dorm.

Harry did as he suggested. Then, after whispering their goodnights, the two boys closed their eyes, and prayed that Minerva had no idea that they had been up.

As the children had rushed away, Minerva McGonagall had reached Hagrid's hut, muttering to herself about anonymous notes and how this had better not be a waste of her time. Not finding anyone there, she eventually came upon Charlie and a woman she did not recognize close to the gates leading out of the school. "A little late for a social call, isn't it, Mr. Weasley?"

"Professor!" Charlie turned quickly, acting surprised to see Minerva. "What are you doing here?"

"I received a note telling me that I'd find Harry Potter, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and your youngest brother out here," Minerva tartly informed Charlie. "So are they here?"

"No," Charlie answered truthfully.

"So why is Ronald missing from his room?" Minerva asked.

"Perhaps you should ask him." Charlie avoided answering the question before asking after Harry and Justin. "What about Harry and Justin? Are they missing as well?"

"I haven't checked on them." Minerva had not stopped to find out if they were also gone, as, after finding Ron missing, she had automatically assumed that the note would be correct and that all three boys had to be out of their beds. "So tell me, have you seen them?"

Suddenly a strange grating noise filled the air, and all three adults swung around in the direction the sound had come from. Minerva immediately lifted her wand up. "Refulgos Maximus."

The grounds lit up like a floodlit stadium but although the three adults could see clearly, they could see no-one or nothing that might have made the noise. Minerva frowned. "I wonder what that was."

"Mysterious noises are not my concern," Tula butted in, her anxiety over the dragon's welfare outweighing Minerva's hunt for the boys. She also had no intention of giving up the children who had been good enough to reunite her with a precious absentee. "My concern is that we need to get this baby dragon back to its mother."

It was only then that Minerva noted the large cage that was rattling ominously. "You have a dragon in there?"

"She's a newborn." Tula patted the cage making 'Roger' snort; not being an expert in dragons, Hagrid had misjudged the dragon's sex. "And right now she needs the warmth and comfort of her mother."

Minerva could only think of one person who would harbor a baby dragon. Glancing back across the grounds towards Hagrid's hut, she asked the obvious question. "Did Hagrid have her?"

"That doesn't matter." Charlie, like Harry, was not going to incriminate Hagrid, even though he knew that Minerva probably had put two and two together and come up with four. "Sorry, Headmistress, but we do have to go."

"I'll bid you goodnight then, Mr. Weasley." Minerva watched as the pair lifted up into the air on broomsticks, the cage precariously balanced between them. Soon they vanished into the dark of the night.

When Minerva arrived back at the school, it was to find that Ron's bed was still empty. Frowning, she headed out of the dormitory, and towards Hufflepuff. After gaining entry to the common room, she made her way to the first year boys' dormitory, where she entered to find all four boys sleeping soundly in their beds. Minerva did not bother to wake the two boys she had gone to question.

With Ron still missing, Minerva's last port of call ended up being the infirmary, where she immediately spotted a sleepy looking Ron tucked up in bed. "Mr. Weasley, are you feeling unwell?"

"Shh." Poppy came rushing over. "I have more patients than just Mr. Weasley in here. He came in about fifteen minutes ago complaining that he had been sick and that he had an upset stomach. I've given him a stomach potion, and I'm going to keep him in overnight."

"I still need to speak to him." Minerva threw up a privacy bubble so that she could speak to Ron without disturbing the other patients. "Mr. Weasley, I checked on you half an hour ago. Where were you?"

Ron stuck to the prearranged story. "I didn't feel well so I started to come here but I had to stop off in the toilets to be sick."

Minerva let out a long breath. "I thought you had been up to mischief."

"I think we can both see he hasn't been." Poppy, who had stayed by Ron's bedside, led Minerva away to allow Ron to get some sleep. "So why were you up so late?"

"Do you have a pot of tea we could share?" Minerva was now wide awake, and she knew it would be some time before she would settle down to sleep.

"You know very well I have." Poppy led the way into her office, and the two women began to chat about Ron, the note, and Minerva's late night expedition.

In his bed in the Gryffindor tower, Neville was wondering what had happened to Ron. He was supposed to have gone with Ron to see Charlie but he had cried off saying he felt unwell. With Ron in the hospital wing, Neville was to spend most of the night fretting but it would be morning before he discovered what had happened to his friend.

The next morning the children all met up, Ron looking tired and grumpy. Hermione took pity on him. "You look terrible."

"So would you if you had been woken up every few hours to get dosed with some nasty medicine." With that comment, Ron glared at Justin.

"Sorry," Justin apologized. "But I didn't know what else to suggest."

"So what happened last night?" Neville asked in a quiet voice.

"We almost ran into McGonagall, and..." Ron began.

"You didn't go and meet Charlie did you?" Hermione interrupted.

"Yeah," Harry said.

Hermione scowled, more than a little annoyed that they had left her out. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I didn't want you to get into trouble," Harry said. "I know how much you worry about marks and your record."

Hermione stopped bristling. "I do but I would still like to have been asked."

Susan decided to say nothing about her inclusion, particularly as she had only been included because she had overheard Justin talking to Harry about meeting Charlie and she had refused to be left behind. "At least you didn't have to have any nasty medicine like Ron."

Ron shuddered. "It was horrid."

"So how did you get past McGonagall?" Neville asked.

"Harry used his invisibility cloak," Ron answered truthfully, keeping his promise to Harry about the tunnel.

"I still know how she found out about us though," Justin said.

"Perhaps she was just doing the rounds," Susan suggested.

Hermione was now thankful that Harry had not included her. "So I suppose it was a good job that I didn't go. I don't think we'd have gotten away with two of us being out of bed."

Neville nodded in agreement, relieved that no-one had discovered the truth that Minerva had received an anonymous note, and that he had been the one who had slipped the note under Minerva's door, hoping to blacken Harry in Ron's eyes when Ron got into trouble. "At least it's over now."

The children agreed, and the conversation turned to what homework they had got left to do that weekend.

16th May 1992

Ron's delighted yell erupted just before the remainder of the school joined him with their cheers; well, the remainder of the school bar Slytherin was cheering. As for Harry, he was currently lying flat on his back looking up at the sky, a fluttering snitch held firmly between his fingers, the snitch being the reason for most of the cheering in the stands. Although, at that moment, on the quidditch pitch there was little cheering going on. Instead, screamed protests were being made by the Slytherin team that the catch Harry had made was unfair, and that it should be disallowed. On the opposite side, Hufflepuff were arguing just as vociferously that it was a good catch, and that they had at least won fair and square.

Both teams were silenced by Madam Hooch, who was about to upset Slytherin, for Mara had no intention of disallowing Harry's catch, having decided that Harry was only in the position he was in thanks to Slytherin's beaters, who had literally forced Harry into the ground. She therefore turned and faced James Llewellyn, one of the Slytherin chasers. "The catch is legal, Mr. Llewellyn."

"But..." Llewellyn was red in the face, anger blighting his usually good-looking features.

"After his accident, even though Mr. Potter was no longer in contact with his broomstick when he caught the snitch, he still had not touched the ground." Mara's voice reflected her disbelief that it had been an accident, before she continued. "And as such it is a legal catch."

"He was almost on the ground!" Llewellyn more or less screamed.

"My decision stands." Mara stole a glance at the teachers' box. Severus Snape had a cold, imperceptible look on his face. Mara could almost feel Severus' disgust all the way from the teachers' box, and she knew that her decision would anger him. "Hufflepuff wins 170 to 140."

Turning angrily to look at his head of house, only after seeing a tiny shake of Severus' head did Llewellyn finally stalk furiously off, indicating with a wave of his hand for his team mates to join him.

While Madam Hooch and countless others had been happy to see Hufflepuff win, Neville was one of the few who were non-Slytherins who was not overjoyed. And he bit down his continuing dismay as Harry handed the snitch to Ron. "Here."

"Really?" Ron could barely believe that Harry was simply going to hand over his precious winning snitch.

"I thought you might like it." Harry was grinning from ear to ear at Ron's look of delight.

Taking the snitch from Harry, Ron was ecstatic, and his voice was filled with awe as he surveyed his prize. "This is the snitch that beat Slytherin for the first time in years."

"Yeah, but they're still probably going to win the Quidditch Cup," Harry reminded Ron. "They play dirty, and have far too many points for Gryffindor to catch. Well, not unless something goes horribly wrong for Ravenclaw when they play Gryffindor."

"I bet we'd have won the Cup this year if you had been on our side," Fred lamented. "Why couldn't you have gotten into Gryffindor?"

Harry shrugged apologetically. "Sorry!"

The adoration continued, and Neville thought he was going to be sick. As far as Neville was concerned, Harry had gotten lucky that day. Unable to bear listening to everyone fawning around Harry, he walked off. Only Hermione noticed, and she nudged Ron. "What's up with Neville?"

"Dunno." Ron barely gave his departing friend a backward glance, instead launching into a retelling of Harry's amazing catch, even though everyone had seen it moments ago, and Harry had lived it.

Hermione, however, was worried about Neville, and she headed after him, catching up with him just before he entered the Gryffindor common room. "Neville, what's wrong?"

Neville was surprised to see that anyone had noticed him leaving. "Nothing. I just wanted to get a head start on my Defense homework."

"Would you like any help?" Having put it off to attend the quidditch match, Hermione had also yet to start her own.

Neville was about to say no when he decided that it might be nice for him to get a little help for once. "Thank you."

The two of them headed into Gryffindor to collect their books, and they then set out for the library. Once there, Neville took out his books, but he did not open them. "Hermione, do you really like quidditch?"

Hermione was a little taken aback by the question. "It's okay."

"But you go to all the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff matches," Neville pointed out.

"Harry and the twins are my friends." Hermione tried hard not to go red as she thought about the real reason she went to see Gryffindor, even though George had seemed a little cool towards her of late. "It's only polite to go and watch the matches."

"So you don't really like quidditch then?" Neville persevered with the subject.

"Not really," Hermione admitted.

"Neither do I." Neville now felt confident enough to share his feelings with Hermione. "In fact I hate it, and I think that it's full of people who just want to show off."

Hermione was stunned by the venom in Neville's voice. "Harry and the twins don't. In fact I'd say that it's probably only Slytherin who do that."

Neville immediately backpedaled. "That's who I meant." He then pointed to his book. "Perhaps I'd better get started on this."

Hermione, however, was not going to let him off the hook that quickly. "Neville, it's okay not to like quidditch, or is it more than that?"

"I don't know what you mean."

Hermione tried to find a tactful way of asking whether Neville hated quidditch because he was such an awful flyer. "Is it because you don't like flying?"

"A little." Neville was relieved that Hermione had not realized that Neville's dislike went deeper than that. "I just get a little fed up when everyone talks about it all the time."

Hermione smiled in consolation. "Ron does goes on about quidditch a lot, doesn't he?"

Neville smiled back gratefully. "Yeah, he does."

"I get fed up with hearing it sometimes as well," Hermione revealed, trying to make Neville feel better. "But please don't tell anyone that."

"Your secret is safe with me," Neville promised. "And you won't tell Ron either what I said, will you?"

"Of course not." Hermione shared another smile with Neville. "It will be our little secret."

"Great." A somewhat happier Neville turned his attention back to his work.

But later that night as he lay in bed listening to Ron opine in length about Harry and how spectacular he had been, Neville found his earlier jealousy resurfacing. "You really like Harry, don't you?"

"He's brilliant," Ron gushed, totally unaware of his friend's dislike of Harry. "And he gave me the winning snitch."

Neville did not need reminding. Ron had already mentioned the fact at least ten times to him and continually to anyone else willing to listen. "Ron, do you want to play a game of chess tomorrow?" Neville was notoriously bad at the game and hated it but he wanted some of Ron's attention turned on him.

"Sorry, no can do," Ron apologized. "I'm going down to the quidditch pitch. Harry said I could use his broom again."

"But you were on it a few days ago," Neville complained. "And you're going to be spending the first part of the summer with Harry."

"I know that," Ron unnecessarily pointed out. "But it's a Nimbus 2000, and if I want to make the team next year, I need all the practice on a decent broom I can get."

"You want to play quidditch?" Neville's voice came out choked when he realized that if this happened, Ron would drift even further away from him.

"Who wouldn't want to?" Ron asked, unable to imagine that his friend would rather much do anything other than that. "Why don't you come down with us?"

"Us?" Neville queried the terminology.

"Justin, Seamus, and Dean are going," Ron answered blithely.

Neville was beyond hurt that Ron had not thought to ask him before then. "Oh."

Ron finally twigged that Neville might be upset. "I thought you knew."

"It doesn't matter anyway." Neville brushed off Ron's excuse. "I have homework I'd forgotten about anyway."

"Didn't you finish it all with Hermione?" Ron had been surprised when he had learnt that the two Gryffindors had been studying together.

"There's still some stuff I haven't done," Neville lied. "I'm going to sleep. Goodnight, Ron."

"Night, Nev." Ron rolled over and within minutes was snoring happily.

Neville, however, was lying awake and seething. He did not want to share Ron with Harry or anyone else for that matter. Neville was of

the opinion that Harry already had enough friends, and that he was going to take Ron away from him. It was then that Neville made up his mind that he could not let Harry do so. However, he had no idea how he was going to stop it from happening.

Next Chapter: The train ride home does not go to plan.

Chapter 19: Danger on the Hogwarts Express

4 July 1992

Harry stretched and got to his feet. "I'm going to find the trolley witch."

Hermione also got up. "I'd like something to drink, so I'll come with you."

Harry rummaged around in his backpack and withdrew a handful of Galleons. "Does anyone else want anything, my treat?"

Ron opted for Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans, but Neville, Justin, and Susan all shook their heads.

As the two friends swayed their way up the train, they talked about what they were planning to do that summer.

Eventually they reached the very last carriage, the one that housed the prefects and any teachers who wanted to ride the train. Harry immediately spotted some familiar faces in the first compartment in the carriage. "I'm surprised to find you sitting this close to the prefects."

Fred grimaced. "George made us late and it was the only compartment left. Quirrell said we could sit here. What are you doing up here?"

"Looking for the trolley witch," Harry said. "I spotted her at the end of this carriage, but I thought I'd say hi first."

"I'd get a move on if you want something to eat now," George told him. "I just came back from there, and she said she's going to be taking a break."

"We'd better hurry then," Hermione said. "I'm dying for something to drink."

"She only had orange juice left," Lee warned her.

"I prefer it anyway," Hermione responded. "Harry, I'll go and get what you want if you want to stay here."

Harry shook his head. "I'm not sure, so I'll come with you. See you lot later." He then headed out and followed Hermione up the corridor, grimacing as he passed the compartment with Quirrell in it. "Ow!"

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, alarmed at how pale Harry had gone.

"Nothing. It was just a twinge," Harry said as he moved away from the compartment. "It's going now."

The trolley witch smiled widely at the two children as they came up to her. "You're just in time, dears. I was about to take a break. What can I get you?"

Harry turned to Hermione. "You go first."

Hermione pointed at the orange juice. "I'd like a small orange juice, please."

The witch poured it out and turned to Harry. "And you, young man?"

"I'd like Bertie Botts..." Harry's voice trailed off as he winced. As he did so, Harry noticed a horrified look on the trolley witch's face as she looked beyond him.

Hermione had also spotted the look on the witch's face and she swung around to see what had caused it, giving a frightened scream at the sight she encountered, her cup of orange juice slipping out of her nerveless fingers to the ground, splattering the bright orange liquid everywhere.

Harry had by now also turned around to discover a grotesque face looking at him. It took him a few long moments to realize that the face was actually inset in the back of someone's head, and he gagged in disgust.

The figure ignored Harry's reaction and twisted an arm around to aim one of its wands at Harry. "It's time to finish what we started in the forest, Potter. A..."

Keeping his wits about him, Harry grabbed Hermione's hand so that the portkey Remus had given him would also be touching her, and

he screamed out, "Harry James Lupin", just as the face slowly intoned rest of the curse. "...vada Kedavra."

When nothing happened, Harry guessed that portkeys were unable to work on the train, and as the green light that came from the figure's wand hurtled their way, Harry pushed his friend to the floor, the momentum forcing him down as well. He vaguely registered a soft thump from behind him, and he had the terrible feeling that the spell had found a victim, albeit not its intended one.

From behind Harry's attacker, who had raised his wand again, a voice screamed out a warning. "Harry, move!"

The girl's yell drew the attention of the attacker, and the two-headed man span around so that the hideous visage now faced the girl who had sent the warning. "You silly, silly girl." As the face uttered the killing curse, the girl took a stumbling step backwards, almost falling over in fear, causing the spell to narrowly miss her.

When the figure had rotated to face the girl, Harry and Hermione had both been shocked to realize that it was Quirrell who had attacked them, or at least Quirrell housing whatever the face was, and scrambling to their feet, they had both failed to realize that Quirrell had cast a spell until it was too late. Hermione gave a scream as Harry was blasted into her, both children catapulting into the refreshment trolley and sending sweets soaring upwards.

As he lay there, Harry wondered why Quirrell had not simply just killed him but his attention was once again drawn back to the girl who had screamed out the warning; a second spell had hit her, and she was now screaming in pain as she collapsed to the floor, her body shaking violently.

Even though his arm hurt horribly from where he had hit the trolley, Harry got back onto his feet and withdrew his wand, screaming out the first spell that came to mind. "Petrificus Totalus."

Quirrell, who had merely watched with an amused look on his face as Harry had sprung into action, dispatched Harry's spell before drawling out, "Reducto."

With Hermione lying dazed at his feet, Harry failed to get out of the way of Quirrell's curse and he was blasted backwards once more,

the force of the spell causing Harry to drop his wand as he smashed into the trolley yet again.

Terrified, Hermione pulled out her own wand, only to discover it had snapped. She therefore resorted to what she believed was their final option and she screamed at the top of her lungs, wondering where the prefects were. "Help! Somebody help!" She had no idea that Quirrell had used locking spells to trap the prefects in their compartments as he had come up the corridor behind her and Harry.

"There's going to be no help for you," a rasping voice said. "You're both going to die."

Trying to buy time, in a shaking voice filled with pain, Harry asked a question as his fingers curled around the wand that had fallen beside him. "Who or what are you?"

"I'm Lord Voldemort, Potter," the rasping voice said as Quirrell began to turn so that the monstrous visage would once again be facing Harry. "And this is what you've done to me, boy."

Harry now finally realized why Quirrell had failed to kill him; Voldemort obviously wanted that pleasure all to himself. "Me?"

Before Voldemort could reply, suddenly, without warning, everything was cloaked in darkness, and Harry rolled to the left as a sizzling sound told him that a spell had just missed him. As he rolled over, Harry connected with a warm arm he assumed belonged to Hermione, and getting to his feet, he tugged her up and pushed her to the right, talking quietly, although the girl Voldemort had hit was still screaming loudly enough to hide any conversation. "Keep right and try to sneak past him."

"Not without you," Hermione hissed back, although she wanted nothing more than to run and hide.

"I'm right behind you," Harry said, having no intention of facing Voldemort or Quirrell if he could possibly avoid doing so.

Hermione therefore started to edge in the dark towards where Harry had told her to go. Then, just as suddenly as it had come down, the darkness vanished, there was a huge explosion, and both children realized that they were no longer alone; six Slytherin prefects were

spilling out of their compartment and taking on Quirrell, having blasted their way out.

Transfixed, Harry could not help but notice that it was now Quirrell doing all the work rather than Voldemort and he was losing, the combined force of the prefects' spells driving Quirrell backwards so that he was almost on top of Harry. Unfortunately that also brought Voldemort's face closer to Harry, and Harry once again found himself clutching his head in pain, and he dropped to one knee with the agony of it.

Having backed into an open compartment, Hermione watched in horror as one of Quirrell's hands turned, so that a wand was now facing Harry. "Accio Potter's wand." Harry's wand flew out of his hand and Voldemort gave a smile filled with satisfaction. "Finally, I'm going to get the vengeance I've waited so long for. Goodbye, Potter."

Stopping to gloat was a mistake on Voldemort's part. In a panic, as Voldemort was speaking to Harry, Hermione began looking around the compartment for something to use, and she spotted the emergency pull cord. Hoping she would not be too late, she reached out and yanked it as hard as she could. The effect was almost instantaneous as the air was expelled from the brakes causing the train's emergency brakes to kick in.

Everyone lurched forward in the carriage, losing their footing with the violence of the abrupt stop. Voldemort's face showed its surprise as he was jerked away from Harry, sending the curse he had just cast blasting into the ceiling of the train, causing a huge gap, through which rain began to pour. However, unfortunately for Harry, Quirrell managed to retain his grip on the wand aimed at Harry, although his main wand and Harry's wand had both been sent flying.

Aware that he might not get another chance to save himself, from his half standing, half kneeling position, Harry launched himself forward onto the now kneeling Quirrell, in an attempt to grab Quirrell's left hand to try and wrench the wand free from his grasp.

Harry was successful in his quest but as he grabbed Quirrell's hand, four things happened: Harry's scar began to pulse even more painfully making Harry cry out in agony and almost let go, Quirrell let out an unearthly scream, Voldemort bellowed 'no', and Quirrell's

body began to shake. Despite his pain, Harry hung on and continued tugging, and then, all at once, the wand was Harry's, but his relief turned to horror as he realized why Quirrell had released the wand.

Too shocked to move, Harry watched as Quirrell's shaking body started to disintegrate, collapsing like a house of cards until nothing but ashes remained. Moments later a high-pitched and tortured scream issued forth from the pile of ashes that was now mounded in and on Quirrell's clothing, and Harry felt rather than saw something coming towards him. He could do nothing to stop it and when it reached him, he doubled up as if he had been punched in the stomach. As darkness claimed him, he heard Hermione screaming his name, and then nothing.

Harry opened his eyes to find a somewhat blurred but kindly face looking back at him. "Aunt Molly," he croaked, "what are you doing on the train?"

"You're not on the train. You're in bed, Harry, and I need you to drink this." Molly scooped Harry up and nestled him against her.

Harry dutifully opened his mouth, and drank the creamy concoction that Molly was holding. After he had finished, he was laid back against the pillows and passed his glasses. "What was that?"

"A pick-me up," Molly said as she straightened Harry's pillows.

It was then that Harry realized where he had to be, even though he had never been in this particular room before. "I'm in your house, aren't I?"

"You are. School finished almost two weeks ago," Molly informed him. "You've been recovering slowly from your attack."

Before Harry could ask another question, a knock sounded at the door and it opened to reveal Remus. "Hi, there."

Harry gave Remus a weak smile. "Hi."

Remus sat down on the opposite side of Harry. "I'd ask how you feel but that would be a stupid question after what happened to you."

Harry sighed. "I'm not entirely sure what happened."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Harry shrugged. "There's not much to talk about really. One moment I was buying stuff from the trolley witch, and then I was being attacked. I did try and get away but the portkey didn't work."

Remus was well aware of that. "I'm sorry, Harry. I should have warned you that the Hogwarts Express is warded against all forms of magical travel but I never expected you to be attacked on it, especially by a teacher."

"Neither did I," Harry said gloomily. "What exactly did he do to me?"

"We're not sure, but your magical core was severely drained," Remus said. "We were worried for quite a while that you wouldn't recover at all but you're tougher than you look."

"Oh." Harry was more than surprised. Then he asked after his friends. "Was everyone else okay?"

Molly did not want to give the bad news to Harry, worried that he would blame himself but she was well aware he would find out eventually if she tried to hide it. "I'm afraid that the trolley witch died."

Harry recalled the soft thump. "I thought she had. The curse went over my head and it must have hit her. When it happened, I never thought about the spell hitting her, just that I needed to get Hermione out of the way, and as she went down, I went with her."

"You reacted exactly as most people would have, Harry," Remus said. "No-one blames you, and you shouldn't either."

Harry still felt guilty but he was well aware that there had been nothing he could have done. "What about Pansy Parkinson? I thought he'd killed her but I'm not sure."

"She's a very lucky girl," Remus said. "One of the Slytherin prefects recognized the curse when Hermione told her what had happened, and so she was able to administer the countercurse but even so Pansy Parkinson has only just returned home from hospital."

"I still don't understand why she tried to help me. She's a Slytherin," Harry said, the shock he had experienced on the train when he had seen who had issued the warning still very much alive.

"Not all Slytherins are bad," Remus said, as he thought about a Slytherin he had once trusted.

"But what she did was something most people would never do. She almost died trying to save me," Harry said, his voice still full of amazement.

"And that's something that can't come out," Remus warned him. "I've spoken in my official capacity to Pansy's parents and they're worried about their daughter being ostracized should other Slytherins discover she tried to help you. The story that is being put out is that she was accidentally hit in the crossfire on her way to get something from the trolley witch, and the Slytherin prefects went to her defense, which is true."

"I won't say anything," Harry promised. "But do you think it would be okay to write to her to thank her?"

"I already anticipated you wanting to do that, and her parents have said that you're more than welcome to do so. Her parents have also waived any obligation you might have under a possible life debt," Remus said.

Harry frowned. "Life debt?"

"Because she helped save your life by distracting Quirrell, some people might say that you owe Pansy something for saving your life," Remus explained. "If it was the case, then it could take the form of money, a favor, or something as simple as giving her a book she wanted that belonged to you. It's up to the person who is owed the life debt."

"Then I need to write to her to offer her something," Harry decided. "She did almost die because of me."

"Just know that you don't have to do anything," Remus told him.

"But it wouldn't be right if I didn't," Harry said, and he made up his mind to write a letter as soon as he felt better. "I must also owe Hermione, all of the prefects..."

Molly interrupted him. "Everyone involved in the incident has agreed that they want nothing from you. Most of the older Slytherin prefects were too embarrassed when they realized that they had aided Harry Potter, although their intent had been to save Pansy." She gave a small smile. "Actually the only person who wants something from you is Hermione Granger. She's the one who pulled the safety cord on the train causing You-Know-Who's spell to go wide."

Harry was surprised to hear that Hermione wanted something, especially as he had saved her life first. "What does she want?"

"For you to spend some time with her this summer," Molly said with a smile, watching Harry's face light up.

"I'd like that as well," Harry said, before he got back to the dismal subject of the attack. "Did anyone else die or get injured?"

"A couple of the prefects had minor injuries, but nothing serious," Remus said. "And Quirrell died."

"I know about him," Harry said, the memory of the screaming man in the forefront of his mind. "I think I killed him."

Molly stroked Harry's hair. "You didn't kill him, Harry. You-Know-Who leaving him killed him."

Harry remembered the face. "I thought it had to be You-Know-Who but I didn't know for certain until he said he was Lord Voldemort."

"I've reviewed the memories of all those that fought against Quirrell," Remus told Harry. "And without doubt it was Voldemort." He watched Molly wince. "Sorry, Molly. It certainly explains why the unicorns were being attacked."

"But why suddenly attack me on a train full of people?" Harry asked, more than a little confused as to why Quirrell had attacked then.

"With Aurors in place around the school, it had become more difficult for Quirrell to obtain unicorns' blood, and this meant that You-Know-

Who's grip on Quirrell was weakening," Remus explained, taking care not to say 'Voldemort' again. "But because he was so deeply embedded in Quirrell, You-Know-Who's slow decay was also killing Quirrell. Attacking you was a last ditch attempt to destroy you before Quirrell's body could no longer sustain You-Know-Who and, we think, not premeditated."

Harry checked he understood Remus correctly. "You mean I was in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

"We think so," Remus acknowledged.

"So did I make him crumble?"

Remus shook his head. "Casting two killing curses was enough to kick-start the process of degeneration, and I could see from Miss Ludgrove's memory of the attack that Quirrell's face was already starting to blister just before Hermione pulled the emergency cord."

Harry gave a sigh of relief. "You mean it wasn't my fault that he died? I thought it was, as he seemed to crumble just as I touched him."

"It was just a coincidence," Remus assured him. "A simple touch from you would never have had that effect."

Harry gave a tired sigh. "So what exactly happened to me then? It just felt as though someone had jumped on my stomach, a bit like that time when Dudley kicked me."

"We think that You-Know-Who's essence smashed through you, but as I've said, we're not entirely sure," Remus said, having watched Julia Ludgrove's memory time and time again. "You were lucky he failed to drain your whole core, otherwise it would have killed you."

"Did the blood wards protection stuff save me?" Harry asked.

Remus shook his head. "I did wonder about that. And so I spoke to the same expert that Tiberius Ogden spoke to after Dumbledore's trial, and she said that even the most effective blood ward protection would have been unlikely to save you."

"So they really were a waste of time?"

"They were," Remus confirmed. "Is there anything else you need to know?"

Harry nodded. "What was the darkness that was in the carriage – was it Vol... You-Know-Who who did it?"

Molly's lips pursed together. "No, it was the twins. They heard the commotion and, after spotting what was happening, they used one of their new tricks to try and help you."

"They weren't hurt, were they?" Harry asked worriedly.

Molly shook her head. "No. They were going to help, but they were sensible enough to get out of the way when the Slytherin prefects stepped in."

"So what's going to happen now?" Harry asked, suddenly feeling exhausted. "Will I have to give a statement?"

Remus shook his head. "You've spoken to me, and that's good enough."

Harry yawned. "I'm glad."

Remus got to his feet. "I think I'd better let you get some more rest. It's going to be a while before you feel like yourself again."

"Will I be staying with you this summer?" Harry asked before Remus could leave.

Remus nodded. "I'm going to be busy for a while but I'm going to be free for the week beginning 17th August, so you can stay with me then." He then bent over and hugged Harry. "I'll keep in touch."

Once Remus had left, a tired Harry snuggled down the bed. "Am I going to stay here all summer apart from visiting Remus and Hermione?"

"When you're more awake, I'll let someone else tell you," Molly said cryptically. Then like Remus, she got up and hugged Harry, adding a kiss to his forehead. "Now get some sleep."

When Harry woke up again, he discovered that he had a visitor who was sitting in an armchair. "Charlie!"

Charlie got up and gave Harry a careful hug. "How are you feeling?"

"Not great," Harry admitted. "How long have you been here?"

"I visited you when you were taken into St. Mungo's," Charlie said, his face sober as he remembered how worried everyone had been that Harry would not survive. "And Mum said you were starting to come round a few days ago, so I took a few days' holiday. I'm due back tomorrow."

Harry struggled to sit up properly and he found himself being lifted as easily as if he had weighed nothing by Charlie and placed higher up his pillows. "Thanks. Could you pass me some water please?"

Charlie handed over the water and waited until Harry had finished drinking before he took the glass off him. "Mum said she mentioned the summer holidays to you."

Harry's eyes lit up, hopeful that Charlie would offer to come home. "She did. Are you coming back here again?"

"No, but you're going to be spending a week with me on the reserve in Romania in three weeks' time," Charlie announced.

Harry was more than a little thrilled. "What am I going to be doing? Will I see the dragons? Where will I sleep?"

"Whoa!" Charlie held up a hand. "You're going to be helping to feed the dragons, cleaning out the dragon enclosures, that sort of thing."

Harry's excitement knew almost no bounds. "It's going to be brilliant."

"Just so you know, you won't be alone," Charlie said. "George and Fred will be there serving a punishment."

"What for?" Harry asked, not aware of any transgressions the twins had made lately.

"The darkness on the train, that was one of their imports for their new mail order joke shop," Charlie told Harry.

Harry nodded. "I know. Aunt Molly told me. She looked a little annoyed."

"She was," Charlie confirmed. "And although she was glad that one of their jokes was able to help save you, Mum was furious that the twins had used the money they got from Dumbledore to buy stock for their new joke business."

"I thought they were going to bank it," Harry said, recalling a conversation he had had with George.

"They changed their minds," Charlie informed him. "Apparently they tried to talk Ron into parting with his money but he refused. He's saving it to buy himself a new wand and a secondhand broomstick."

"He's been using mine at school," Harry told Charlie. "I'm not sure when I'll be back on my feet so he can use it now if he wants."

"He's at Neville's," Charlie said. "Mum wanted it as quiet as possible for you around here, and so she farmed everyone out. The twins are staying with Lee, Ginny is at Luna's, and Percy is well, Percy, and so Mum let him stay."

"Percy won't be going to Romania, will he?" Harry asked hesitantly, not wanting to be rude about Charlie's brother.

"Good grief, no," Charlie said as he shook his head and laughed. "Percy wouldn't last five minutes. And I'm a little worried about you too to be truthful. So while I am going to be tough on the twins, although I do expect you to do some work, I'll take it easy on you."

"I don't care what I have to do." Harry smiled happily at Charlie. "It will be fun to see what you do."

Charlie could see that the offer had made Harry happy. "Okay." His face then turned serious. "Harry, is there anything you want to talk about? About what happened, I mean."

Harry's good mood vanished, but he shook his head, having brought up what he needed to with Remus. "Not really. Remus told me that

Pansy Parkinson had been injured, and that the trolley witch died. And it still doesn't feel as though it happened to me, so right now I don't want to talk about it again."

Charlie felt a little disappointed that Harry had not wanted to talk to him, but he quashed the disappointment, simply being glad that Harry had bothered to open up to anyone. "In that case, is there anything else you might want to talk about?"

Harry nodded, and gave Charlie a cheeky grin. "Quidditch."

Charlie grinned back and the two indulged in a lighthearted chat until after dinner, which they shared in the bedroom. Then Charlie headed off downstairs when Molly came in to collect the dishes. "I'm glad to see you're eating well, Harry."

"The food's amazing, Aunt Molly," Harry told her, and he yawned. "Sorry, I'm still tired."

"Then I'll let you get some more sleep."

As Molly headed for the door, Harry called out to her. "Before you go, Aunt Molly, where am I? I know it's your house, but I don't know whose room this is."

"It's Ginny's," Molly informed him. "I thought Ron's room would be a little too bright for you, and this is closer to my bedroom."

Harry smiled over at Molly. "I'll thank Ginny for giving up her room when I see her."

"She offered." Molly had been unsurprised by Ginny's offer... her daughter's crush on the Boy Who Lived was not exactly a secret. "I'll send her up with your lunch tomorrow if you'd like. The children are coming home then."

"I would, and then I can thank her myself." Harry did, however, wonder if Ginny would say more to him than she had done at Christmas.

Azkaban Prison

Sirius took the newspaper that Cornelius Fudge had deigned to let him have on his way out, reading the headlines. Getting up, he marched to his bars. "Dumbledore, wake up."

Albus shot upright. "No, please." Then he came to, and he turned as he heard his name being called. "Black, what do you want?"

"I want to know if you knew about Quirrell," Sirius barked out, the newspaper rustling in his hand.

Albus' eyes went wide at the sight of the newspaper. "How did you get that?"

"Does it matter?" Sirius said, not revealing he had been given it by Fudge, Dumbledore having missed the whole visit as he tried to catch up on his sleep. "Did you know about Quirrell?"

"What about him?" Albus asked irritably, trying to work out how Sirius had obtained the newspaper.

"He attacked my godson on the Hogwarts' Express," Sirius snarled, shaking the newspaper. "This paper said that it is believed that he had a nervous breakdown and that he blamed Harry for your incarceration. So tell me, do you know why Quirrell attacked Harry?"

Albus sighed. "I might."

"Then tell me," Sirius demanded.

"What good would it do?"

"I want to know," Sirius barked out, his anger making his voice tremble.

A clang signaled the Dementors' release.

"Saved by the bell, but you will tell me when they've gone," Sirius ordered.

Albus, who by now knew to lie down, hurried to his bed and closed his eyes. He then used his mastery of Occlumency to make his mind go blank. He had discovered after the first few Dementor visits that this helped him to channel his emotions inside of him, and the

Dementors usually quickly moved on, leaving him relatively unscathed. He still had to figure out how Sirius had survived so long without going insane, as he suspected that the man was not using the same technique as himself.

Albus' peace was disturbed when, the moment the Dementor incursion was over, Sirius was up on his feet and back at the bars. "You're going to answer my earlier question."

Albus knew he could have refused but the last time he had done so, Sirius had kept up a constant whistling, driving Albus mad in a way the Dementors had so far failed to do, and so he had chosen to answer Sirius' questions instead. "Yes, I suspected something wasn't quite right with Quirrell but I have no idea why he would attack Harry. I doubt it would be in retribution for my imprisonment, despite what the paper says. Quirrell had already handed his notice in before I was arrested."

Sirius looked back at the newspaper report. "So why the hell did he go nuts? It says here that Quirrell killed the trolley witch, and that he injured Harry and two girls in his year, a Slytherin and a Gryffindor."

Albus frowned. "Why would Harry have been with a Slytherin?"

Also wondering the same, Sirius read the report more closely. "I don't know. It doesn't give any more detail than that." He lowered the newspaper as a thought occurred to him. "Was Quirrell a Death Eater?"

"You're asking me?" Albus asked in a voice filled with incredulity.

"I've been locked up for a long time, Dumbledore," Sirius pointed out. "And I have no idea who is loyal to Voldemort and who isn't. So do you know if he was a Death Eater?"

When Albus failed to answer him, Sirius began to whistle loudly and off-key, until eventually Albus snapped. "No, he was not; at least as far as I know he wasn't."

Sirius relented and stopped whistling, looking back at the newspaper as he talked to himself. "So what made him snap?"

Watching Sirius pacing up and down, Albus pointed to the newspaper as he finally realized how Sirius had been aware of Harry's background. "That's how you knew what was going on with Harry, isn't it? Somehow you managed to get hold of a newspaper before now."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Obviously. It's only twice a year but it's better than nothing."

Albus then made the connection. "Fudge's visit. But why would he give you a newspaper?"

"I think I intrigue him," Sirius said. "Like you, he can't figure out why I'm not a raving loony like my cousin." He looked over at Albus. "Actually you're lasting much longer than I would have thought. You're using Occlumency, aren't you?"

"Yes," Albus admitted, seeing no reason to hide it. "But I doubt you're doing the same."

Sirius grinned, aware it would infuriate Albus. "No, I'm not. But I could have."

"Knowing you as I thought I once did, I don't think you have the patience required to learn to meditate," Albus retorted.

Sirius was far from surprised that Albus thought that. "I had to learn basic Occlumency as part of my medical training but you're right, I don't have the patience to take it much further than that."

"So how are you doing it?" Albus asked, the mystery of Sirius' sanity one of the many questions Sirius had still failed to answer to Albus' satisfaction.

"I've already told you," Sirius said. "It's all down to willpower. I have something to live for."

"You mean killing Harry in retaliation for what he did to your Master," Albus said, still refusing to believe that Sirius had not been on Voldemort's side, as his earlier comment proved.

Sirius had long given up trying to convince Albus otherwise. "Yes, Harry is my reason for going on."

"But at least I have the satisfaction of knowing you'll never get to him," Albus responded. "And I'm going to warn him somehow that you're after him."

"After what you've done to him, I doubt he'd listen even if you could find a way," Sirius said, as he folded up the newspaper. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to do a little light reading."

When Sirius moved away from the bars to lie on his bed, Albus could do little but imitate the man, and dropping onto his own bed, he began to contemplate a way to warn Harry that Sirius was still gunning for him.

In his cell, concerned about Harry, Sirius was thinking just as hard of a way to escape, although, as with every idea he had come up with so far, no idea seemed viable. Deciding to put his thoughts about escape on the back burner, Sirius began to read the precious newspaper he had been given.

Next Chapter: Harry writes to Pansy Parkinson; Remus takes Harry to view the prophecy.

Chapter 20: The Prophecy

Two Days Later

Harry felt much better when he awoke, and remembering what he had said to Remus, he asked a still shy Ginny for some paper and a quill when she delivered his breakfast. Then he set about composing a letter to Pansy Parkinson.

'Dear Pansy,

I'm not really sure what to write but I want to say thank you for helping to save me. I'm sorry that you got hurt, and I know that your parents said I don't owe you a life debt but I still wanted you to know that if there is anything I can do for you, then please tell me.

Sincerely

Harry Potter'

Salisbury Towers, Manchester

Pansy struggled to sit up in bed as her father brought her a letter. "Is it from Malfoy?"

"No, and so I think you might like to see it," Patrick Parkinson said as he handed it over.

Pansy noted the return address immediately, and she sneered. "I should have known that Potter would do something like this."

"Pansy!"

Pansy colored. "I don't even know why I called out to him."

"Because it was the right thing to do," Patrick told her. "And even though we've said that Potter won't be indebted to you, it looks as though he's done the right thing as well."

Pansy ripped open the letter and scanned it. "He did. He said if there's anything he can ever do, to ask."

"And is there anything you want?"

Pansy shook her head, before saying, "Just for him to tell no-one."

"And I'm sure that's exactly what he will do. The Unspeakable who came here told me that the prefects involved believe you were caught in the crossfire, and only Potter and his friend know the truth about you trying to help him when Quirrell went mad."

As Pansy, like all of the prefects, had been obliviated of their knowledge of the face in the back of Quirrell's head, Patrick had no idea that it had been Voldemort who had been behind the attack. Minister Fudge had refused to accept Hermione's story that it had been Voldemort, and Fudge had said that she had been panic-stricken and not thinking clearly. It had taken Amelia Bones' intervention to stop Fudge from having both Harry and Hermione obliviated of what Fudge had considered hysterical ramblings.

Pansy was relieved to hear that no-one other than Harry and Hermione knew about her. And although Pansy loathed Hermione, she believed that the girl was too much of an honorable sort to say anything, which was a good thing as Pansy was well aware that her life would be made a living hell if any of the other Slytherins ever found out what she had done. Her beliefs, however, did not stop her mouthing off to her father. "Then I'd better write back and tell Potter that I don't need anything, and to tell Granger that if she knows what's good for her she had better keep quiet."

"Pansy!" Patrick warned again.

Pansy colored once more. "I just don't want anyone finding out."

"They won't," Patrick reassured his daughter, before kissing her cheek. "Now stop worrying and get writing, and try not to be too rude."

"Yes, Dad." Pansy hugged her father, before she picked up her writing set he had just passed to her, taking out her favorite quill.

"I'll come and collect the letters from you in a while," Patrick offered, before leaving the room.

When he left, Pansy put down her quill. Despite what she had told her father, she knew exactly why she had helped Harry, not that she

was going to tell anyone the truth. Picking her quill back up, Pansy began to write...

The Burrow

Harry opened up the letter he had received from a rather distinguished Eagle Owl.

'Potter,

I don't want anything from you except for you to keep your mouth shut.

Parkinson'

Harry crumpled up the letter, having no idea that a similarly worded missive had gone out to Hermione. "Now that's more like a Slytherin."

Adhering to Pansy's wishes, Harry asked Molly to destroy the letter when she came upstairs with his dinner. In her own home, Hermione had shredded her letter, but decided she would discuss it with Harry when he came to stay.

Priory House, Sussex

Hermione's face lit up when she opened the front door. "Harry!"

Harry smiled shyly at Hermione. "Hermione, it's great to see you."

Hermione ignored the shy smile and shot out of the front door to hug Harry. "I came to see you in St. Mungo's and you were out cold." Then after releasing Harry, she smiled at the woman accompanying him. "Hello, Mrs. Weasley."

"It's lovely to see you again, dear," Molly said, smiling back at Hermione. "Are your parents in?"

Hermione nodded. "Well, Daddy is. Mummy's at work."

"Can I speak to him?" Molly asked.

Hermione flushed as she realized she had forgotten her manners. "Sorry, please come in. I was just so excited to see Harry."

"I quite understand," Molly said, as she was ushered inside Hermione's home. "This is very lovely."

Harry tuned out the conversation that ensued as he gaped at the size of the entryway, which alone was bigger than the whole of the ground floor of Privet Drive. A large oak staircase dominated the entryway, with a huge chandelier dangling right above where Harry was standing. Doors branched off either side of the entryway and Harry wondered whether Hermione ever got lost. Then he grinned to himself. He was being stupid!

Hermione caught Harry's grin. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Harry immediately said. "I'm just thinking how big this place is."

"It belonged to Daddy's parents, and they liked the space Daddy said," Hermione explained.

"As do I," a man's voice boomed out, and a fairly tall, dark-haired man with chocolate brown eyes began walking towards Molly and Harry with his hand outstretched. "I'm Lester Granger."

"Molly Weasley," Molly said as she found her hand in a firm handshake before it was released. "I just wanted to thank you for taking Harry in for the week, and to give you contact details in case of any problems."

Lester took the note that Molly handed him. "I take it this has his healer's details in it."

Molly nodded. "And the note is also a multi-destination portkey; the pass codes are written down inside. I don't want to be an alarmist but given what happened to Harry at the end of school I don't want to take any chances with his safety or that of your family's."

Lester pocketed the note. "We have top of the line Muggle security in place, and if anyone tries to break-in, I'll have plenty of warning and time to get Harry and everyone else out. But thank you for this. It certainly makes me feel more secure."

"You can keep it once Harry returns home," Molly said. "You never know when you might need something like it."

"That's very generous of you, and much appreciated," Lester said, and he nodded towards the kitchen. "I know you said in your note that you would only be dropping Harry off but would you like to stay for lunch?"

Molly shook her head. "I need to get back to the children. I've left Percy, my eldest boy that still lives at home, in charge, but I can't trust his younger brothers not to play up."

Lester held out his hand again. "Then I'll let you leave."

Molly shook hands, gave Harry and Hermione a hug, and then she vanished. Lester sighed. "I wish I could do that. I would save hours in traffic."

Hermione grinned, well aware of her father's dream. "I wish you were magical as well, Daddy."

"At least you are," Lester said, tweaking Hermione's nose, before he turned his attention to Harry. "So you're the young man who's been causing so much trouble."

Harry went red. "Um, yes, sir."

Lester laughed. "I'm sorry, Harry. I'm only teasing you. I'm just glad that you're okay. It was a bit of a shock to discover that Hermione had been dicing with danger, and it was all because of someone I'd only read about in books."

Harry went even redder at the mention of his appearance in books, Hermione also blushing. "Daddy, you weren't supposed to mention that."

"You should have known it would come out sooner or later," Lester told his daughter before he looked Harry up and down. "Well, you don't exactly look like the stuff of legends to me."

"That's because I'm not," Harry said indignantly. "I don't remember what happened on the night my family died, and..."

Lester immediately broke in, his voice gentle. "Harry, I didn't mean to upset you or to bring up such a painful night. I'm afraid you'll have to forgive me. I like to tease, and although Hermione is used to it, it's obvious that you're not, so I'm sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable."

After deciding that Hermione's father had only been trying to make him feel at ease, rather than focusing on his fame, Harry gave Lester a slight smile. "I could get used to be teased."

Lester's infectious grin returned to his face. "In that case, why don't we show you where you'll be sleeping and we'll get to know each other before we meet Virginia for dinner."

As much as Harry liked Lester, he unfortunately was unable to say the same about Virginia. He thought Hermione's mother was a bit of a snob, and he also had the feeling that she was not as taken with Harry as Lester was. But she was polite throughout dinner, and so Harry knew he was only guessing. However his guess turned to certainty as the week progressed and Virginia more or less avoided being with him.

One Week Later

When it came time to leave, Harry was unsurprised to find only Lester and Hermione waiting to take him to London to Susan Bones' home. When they arrived at the address on the slip of paper that Harry had been sent by Susan, they found themselves outside of a tall Georgian building, and before Harry could even get out of the car, Susan and a pink-haired girl came dashing out of the house, Susan waving and calling out, "Harry!"

As with Hermione, Harry found himself enveloped in a hug, not only by Susan, but by the mysterious pink-haired girl, who proceeded to introduce herself. "Wotcha, Harry. I'm Tonks, and I'm going to be looking after you since Mum is on holiday." Tonks' mum, Andy usually babysat for Susan when Amelia was busy, but she had gone on holiday with her husband and so Tonks had offered to take care of the children, her second training year at the Auror Academy now over.

Lester climbed out of the car and introduced himself and Hermione, thinking that the pink-haired girl was rather strange but also very bubbly. "Molly Weasley said that you have your own portkey for Harry."

Tonks nodded vigorously. "We do, although I can't see what all the fuss is about over him." She winked at Harry.

As with Lester, Harry found himself taking to this new person in his life and he beamed at her. "Nor me." When Lester tapped on his watch to indicate that time was moving on, Harry turned to Hermione and hugged her. "I'm going to miss you. Have a brilliant time in France."

"I will," Hermione promised as she let go of Harry. "Write to me."

"Every day," Harry promised in return. "And I'll send you some pictures when I go to Romania."

"Just be careful," Hermione warned and then she stepped away to allow her father to say goodbye.

Lester shook Harry's hand before giving him a brief hug. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Harry. And you're welcome to stay with us anytime you want."

Harry smiled at Lester. "It was good of you to let me stay, Lester."

Lester had refused to let Harry call him 'Mr. Granger'. "I've enjoyed your company, Harry. But as we have a flight to catch and I still have to pick up Virginia from the surgery, we'd better get going. Enjoy the rest of your holidays and try to stay out of trouble."

"I will," Harry said, and he waved at the pair as they drove away, before he headed indoors with Susan and Tonks.

Harry soon decided that although Tonks was a little wild she was also good fun, and the two weeks that Harry spent with Tonks and Susan ranked as some of the best of his life. Tonks had almost as good a time as Harry and Susan: she let them stay up late a couple of times; they watched television together at Tonks' home, Ted Tonks, her father, being a Muggleborn and refusing to give up his television; and they ate out more than was good for either of them.

But what Harry had loved most of all was the trips that Tonks took them on: the zoo; the Tower of London; the circus, where Tonks admitted she had always wanted to ride on an elephant; the wizarding section of the British Museum - she felt that she ought to make at least one trip educational – and the seaside.

Eventually though it had to come to an end, and Harry found himself waiting anxiously as Tonks read the note that a large barn owl had delivered. "What time is Aunt Molly coming?"

"She's not." Tonks folded the letter over. "Ginny is under the weather, and Mrs. Weasley has asked if I can hand you over to Charlie."

"Will you?" Harry asked hopefully, glad to be able to spend just a little longer with his sitter.

"You betcha." Tonks said. "Mrs. Weasley included the portkey to use, and so you've got about twenty minutes."

The next twenty minutes were a chaotic dash as Harry made sure he had got everything, checked again, and then finally said goodbye to Susan before taking Tonks' hand. With moments to spare, Harry felt the familiar tug of a portkey. When he arrived, he was surprised to find that they were in the open. "Where exactly are we?"

"Romania hopefully." Tonks waved a greeting to a woman who was coming their way. "Hello. Is Charlie Weasley around?"

The woman nodded. "He is." She then smiled at Harry. "Hello again, Harry."

"Hello, ma'am." Harry politely greeted Tula, the woman who had accompanied Charlie to collect Roger. "Thanks for letting me stay and help with the dragons."

Tula thought Harry was adorable. "You're welcome but you should know that you are going to be taking it easy, Harry. Charlie told me that this isn't a punishment for you, unlike the twins."

"Yeah." Harry scuffed the ground with his boot, suddenly feeling a little shy under Tula's gaze. "But I'm feeling much better, and I want to help as much as I can."

Like Charlie, Tula knew how much hard work caring for the dragons was. "If you end up working as hard as Charlie plans to make the twins work, I bet you'll be begging to go home by the end of the week." She started to walk back towards a large enclosure. "Come on, I'll show you where you're staying." She stopped and pointed to a shed. "Charlie's in there."

Tonks could see that Harry was beginning to relax in Tula's presence, and she therefore headed over to the shed, knocking on the outside of it before entering. "Charlie?"

Charlie swung around from cleaning a shovel. "Tonks? What are you doing here?"

"I've been looking after Harry." Tonks stepped up to where rows and rows of tools were lined up. "Didn't anyone tell you?"

"Yes, but I was expecting Mum." Charlie placed the shovel in a gap on the second row.

"A shovel?" Tonks did not explain about Molly's absence.

"Some of the dragons react badly to magic so we have to use Muggle tools and methods to take care of them," Charlie explained, and he then again asked after Molly. "Is Mum alright?"

Tonks explained why Molly was not there. "So unfortunately you have to put up with me."

"So where's Harry?" Charlie started to lead the way back out into the daylight.

"With a woman who's showing him where he's going to be sleeping." Tonks fell into step beside Charlie, lengthening her legs to keep up with him. "She and Harry appeared to know each other."

"That would be Tula." Charlie pushed open the enclosure door, before closing it again after Tonks entered. "Welcome to Dragon Reserve."

"That was hardly original." Tonks remarked on the name, as she took in the large wooden enclosures. "They're made of wood, Chaz."

"Don't call me that." Charlie hated the nickname Tonks had given him at school. "And they've been fireproofed. Wood is plentiful, and can be replaced easily."

"Sorry, Charles!" Tonks response was full of sarcasm.

"And don't call me that either." Charlie stopped walking. "You're one of the few people I know who really pisses me off without trying, Nymie."

Tonks scowled and barked out, "Don't call me that!"

"Then use my proper name." Charlie grinned at the person who had come running over to him. "Harry, you're here."

"Charlie!" Harry hugged the redhead, before flashing a cheeky grin at Tonks. "Nymie?"

"Don't go there, Harry," Tonks warned. "So can I leave you here now?"

Harry's smile vanished, and he threw himself at Tonks. "Thanks for looking after me. I'm going to miss you."

"I'll write," Tonks promised, before sliding her arm around Harry's shoulders. "Make sure you take good care of Harry, Chaz."

"He'll be in safe hands, Nymie." Charlie's response was as acerbic as Tonks. "See you!"

"Yeah." Tonks gave Harry one last hug. "Be good."

"I will." Harry's voice was choked with tears. He had grown to love the quirky and slightly mad girl in the space of the two weeks he had spent with her, and although he was really looking forward to spending time with Charlie, he really was going to miss her.

"Bye then." Tonks operated the portkey and vanished, leaving Harry in Charlie's care.

Charlie let out a long sigh of relief. "Thank Merlin she's gone. She drives me mad."

Harry was puzzled by Charlie's attitude, and he frowned. "But Tonks said that you two were friends at school, even though she was in Hufflepuff."

"We were." Charlie ruffled Harry's hair in an effort to chase away the frown. "But we rub each other up the wrong way sometimes."

Tula whispered something under her breath that Harry did not catch, but Charlie obviously did, because he scowled at his boss. "I don't think so."

"Just commenting on the facts." Tula smirked, and she promptly changed the subject. "I think it is time for lunch. Harry, have you ever tried Ardei Umplutzi?"

Harry shook his head a little worriedly. "No, what is it?"

"It's sweet peppers stuffed with minced meat and rice," Charlie informed him.

Harry was relieved when Charlie explained the food to him. "Sounds good."

"Come on then." Charlie led the way to the food tent. "I bet Ron is already forging his way through the meal."

"Ron's here?" Harry glanced at the tent.

"He got here last night together with Fred and George," Charlie lifted the flap. "They're over there."

Harry shot over to where his friends were, leaving Charlie and Tula alone. "He seems happy to be here."

Charlie grinned. "If he wants to keep up with the twins, he won't be by tomorrow night."

The Next Evening

Harry groaned. "I'm going to die."

"You're not alone then," Ron joined in. When he had found out about Harry going to spend time with Charlie, he had begged his mother to let him go. It was only now he was regretting it. "Why did I ever ask to come along?"

"Coz you love Harry," George cackled, before groaning and dropping down onto his bed. "My pains have pains."

Charlie strode into the tent and caught the end of George's comment. "You do get used to it."

"If I never see a piece of dragon dung again then I'll be a happy person," Fred informed his older brother. "How can a baby dragon poop so much?"

"I thought the same thing when I first started," Charlie revealed, before checking on Harry, who had tried to keep up with the twins. "Harry, how are you holding up?"

"I'm dead!" Harry announced dramatically. "Just make sure that they wash me before they bury me."

Charlie laughed out loud. "I'm afraid you'll be washing yourself. So go get showered, and then join us for dinner."

Ron opened up one eye at the sound of dinner. "Be right there," he promised as his brother left the tent.

Two hours later, after dinner had ended, Charlie made his way to the tent his brothers and Harry were in. All four boys were sound asleep, still fully clothed and in need of a shower. Pulling out his wand, he cast cleaning spells on them, transfigured their clothes into pajamas, and left the tent.

The next morning the four boys were ravenous at breakfast. But by the end of the day, once more it was all they could do to make their way to their tent. This happened for the next few days but by the final day they were all getting more used to the physical exercise. As they sat and ate breakfast, Charlie revealed a surprise. "For your last day you won't be mucking out."

"What will we be doing?" Harry did not think anything could be much worse than mucking out, but he could not be entirely sure.

"We're going to see the Berca mud volcanoes first..." Charlie began, and waving his hand as he spoke, he began to recite what he had planned for them all. "And then we're going on a tour of what is called Bran Castle and was supposed to be the home of Dracula according to the Muggles."

The four boys burst out laughing, and George grinned at his brother. "I bet the Muggles would be shocked if they knew that Dracula preferred Diagon Alley, and that he was real."

"Probably, but to know that they would also have to know that Bram Stoker was a squib and that our world exists," Charlie reminded his brother, before continuing to outline their day. "And finally, we're going to the Black Sea. You four can splash around, and I can relax before we have dinner tonight at a restaurant and then you'll portkey home."

"Am I going to stay with Remus?" Harry checked, not sure if things might have changed.

"Yes, he'll be collecting you at the end of the day." Charlie clarified what would happen to Harry. "And this lot is going home. Now I suggest you all head off, grab a towel, and meet me back here in ten minutes."

And so Harry's last day was filled with fun and a little history, although he enjoyed playing in the sea the most. He was almost sorry when Remus turned up, but after hugging Charlie, and promising him faithfully to be good at school, he dutifully took hold of Remus' hand and vanished with him.

The Next Day

After breakfast, Remus left the sitting room. When he returned he was carrying a cloak and a badge. "These are the things I said I would need to sort out before I could take you to see the prophecy."

Harry's eyes widened. "You're going to take me today?"

"If you want to go," Remus said. "I've talked it over with Molly and Arthur, and they both agree that although they don't want you to be

burdened with the knowledge of what you'll be learning, they think it in your best interests to be forewarned."

"And what about if I said I'd changed my mind?" Harry asked.

Remus had no intention of forcing Harry to do something he had no wish to do. "Then you don't have to go."

His experience with Dumbledore had taught Harry to ask questions, and he now did so. "What if I hear the prophecy and can't deal with it?"

"Then I'll obliviate you," Remus responded.

Harry felt a shiver go through him. "I'm not sure how I feel about that."

Remus immediately confessed. "Harry, I've done it to you once before."

Harry was shocked. "When?"

"When your aunt was executed," Remus said. "You were there but afterwards you had such terrible nightmares that you agreed to let me obliviate you and cover over the memories."

"So they're still there?"

"Yes, but they're buried beneath the surface," Remus explained. "And no, I'm not going to bring them to the surface again."

"I'm not sure I want the memories back if they were that bad," Harry said, wondering what had been so horrifying that he had been unable to cope.

Remus held up the cloak and badge. "So, do you want to go?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah."

Remus passed over the cloak. "In that case, this is for you. Put it on."

Harry put the cloak on. Although it was made of a dark brown hessian, it actually felt soft against his skin, and the hood shifted almost automatically to cover Harry's head. He quickly tugged it down. "That was weird."

"It's a security measure. And just so you know, only we can take down our own hoods," Remus revealed. "The hood disguises your face and masks your voice, and the cloak helps to hide your magical signature."

Harry now thought the cloak almost as interesting as his invisibility cloak. "Will I be able to keep this?"

Remus nodded. "It's tailored for you specifically. I used a spell on you early this morning while you were sleeping to get your magical signature, which means that if anyone else puts on the cloak, that's all it is, a simple cloak."

Harry was rather delighted. "That's brilliant."

Remus then handed over the badge. "Although you're a little short and far too young to be an Unspeakable that is what the badge claims you are."

Harry took the badge. "If I'm too young, then why am I being allowed to do this?"

"Because I'd rather no-one else be aware of your presence at the Ministry and of what we are about to do. And Ignotus and the Weasleys agree with me," Remus explained, and he then tapped the badge he had just given Harry. "As you'll see, you have top level clearance, and your code name is Risus."

"Risus?"

Remus smiled. "It means laughter. I chose it because you were always laughing as a baby."

Harry knew that only too well from the memories he had seen of himself when he had stayed with Remus previously. "Do you have a code name?"

"I do. It's Amicus," Remus said, and he watched Harry visibly recoil. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," Harry said, giving a shiver. "The name just gave me goosebumps. What does it mean?"

"Friend," Remus told him, and he put up his hood. "Are you ready?"

Harry's eyes widened. "You sound really scary."

"You'll sound very similar with your hood up," Remus told him. "Now put it up and hold onto my arm."

Harry did as he was told, and he soon found himself standing in a long corridor, at the end of which was a door. "Where are we?"

"Ninth floor of the Ministry," Remus said. "You've been here before but the trip up here was part of the memories I obliviated. So, when we go through the door ahead, the room will spin. Identify yourself as Risus, Unspeakable, and then say 'Access Hall of Prophecy'."

Harry did as he was told as he entered a room that was circular with a highly polished black floor. As the room began to spin, Harry heard Remus speaking similar words to him and then the room stopped and a door opened. "Can I go in?"

Remus nodded. "Yes. Most people have to get into this room through the Time Room where there's heavy security. Being Unspeakables we can go in the quick way."

Ahead of him, Harry could see, by the light of hundreds of blue-flame candles, towering shelves that seemed to stretch on forever. On the shelves were thousands of glass orbs. "What are they?"

"They're the records of prophecies that seers have made." Remus started walking. "Don't try and touch one, you'll end up insane if you do."

Nervously Harry shoved his hands into his cloak pockets as he followed Remus. "Is my prophecy in here?"

After a short walk, Remus stopped and pointed. "It's that one there."

Harry looked nervously at the orb. "I won't go mad if I touch it?"

"As it pertains to you, no," Remus said, before gently encouraging Harry to take it. "Go ahead, take it."

Harry therefore reached out and gingerly took the orb in his hands, surprised to see swirling blue mists inside the globe. "What do I do with it?"

Before Remus could answer, a woman's face appeared in the orb, almost causing Harry to drop it in fright. The woman in the orb then began to speak:

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches
Born to the one who has thrice defied him, born as the seventh
month dies
And the Dark Lord will mark the child as his equal, and he will have
power the Dark Lord knows not
And one must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while
the other survives."

The mists resumed their swirling, and the woman's face disappeared when she finished speaking. It happened all too quickly for Harry, and he was far from remembering the prophecy word for word. "Can I make it play again?"

"Just look into it," Remus told him.

As he did and the woman began again, Harry spoke out loud with her, reciting the prophecy. He did it twice just to make sure that he had gotten it all. He then glanced over at Remus. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Let me put it back," Remus said, holding out his hand.

Harry stepped back. "I want you to tell me exactly what it means. I know you must know."

"I do, but we can't talk here," Remus said and once again he held out his hand.

Harry kept a firm hold of the orb. "You'll go mad."

"That would only happen if I took it down from the shelf, and not when I'm replacing it," Remus said, his hand still outstretched.

Harry handed it over. "So are we going home?"

"No, to my office." Remus pointed back in the direction they had come. "You'll have to hold onto to me this time as you don't have an office, and only those who do can access the office corridor."

Harry therefore took Remus' arm as they left the Hall of Prophecy, wondering what he was going to discover when they reached Remus' office.

Next Chapter: Harry learns more about prophecies and Severus Snape.

Chapter 21: Defying Voldemort

After leaving the Hall of Prophecy Harry found himself inside a long corridor lined with doors that seemingly went on for forever, and none of the doors were labeled. "How do you know which is your office?"

Remus walked up to the fifteenth black door on the left. "I just do. Come in."

Harry looked around the large office, which had a picture window showing a view of a rainy Paris. "Is that what it's like in Paris today?"

Remus nodded. "We all have our favorite real-time vistas to look at. You can sit down and take off your hood. If anyone knocks at my door, then put it back up."

Harry sat down and took down the hood, glad to be free of its confines. "Are you going to tell me about the prophecy now?"

Remus nodded. "As I told you previously, I only knew the gist of the prophecy up until today, as Dumbledore and your parents never went into detail."

Harry found this rather odd. "Why didn't they tell you?"

Remus gave a slight grimace. "At the time, Voldemort was recruiting werewolves, and we knew we had a leak somewhere. I naturally came under suspicion, and I was therefore only let into the bare bones of the prophecy, the part that Dumbledore knew Voldemort was aware of."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean by 'the part'?"

"One of Voldemort's followers overheard the prophecy being made..." Remus began to explain, only to stop when Harry's frown deepened. "What's up?"

"He had followers?" Even as Harry asked the question, he supposed he should have realized that Voldemort might have had supporters, but up until then it had never really occurred to him.

Harry's question made Remus realize that there were large chunks missing from Harry's education. "Voldemort's followers were called Death Eaters, and if he's trying to come back, then so might they. Although quite a lot of them are now dead, there are still some in Azkaban and some who managed to bargain their way free."

"Did the person who overheard the prophecy go free, are they dead, or are they in prison?" Harry asked, his voice taut with a myriad of emotions.

"I don't know," Remus said, Dumbledore never having revealed to him who had eavesdropped during the making of the prophecy. "But I suspect the answer might be that they're free, as I believe the person who overheard it may have been Snape."

Although he had suspected Snape of being evil, hearing it confirmed was a different matter, and Harry visibly paled. "He was one of Voldemort's Death Eaters?"

"I think he was more than that," Remus said. "Voldemort had an Inner Circle, a group that he supposedly not only trusted implicitly but whose members were more powerful than a standard Death Eater, and I'm convinced Snape was one of them."

"But you don't know for sure?" Harry asked, a small shiver going down his spine.

"I don't, but you should be careful, Harry," Remus warned. "Just like any adult wizard, standard Death Eaters are a force to be reckoned with, let alone a member of the Inner Circle."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "But how would I know a Death Eater if I saw one?"

Remus gave a grim smile. "You wouldn't in normal circumstances, but in battle or during an attack, Death Eaters tend to stand out in a crowd. They wear black cloaks and white masks, except for the members of Voldemort's Inner Circle."

"What do they wear?"

"The same black cloak but they also wear a silver mask instead of a white one."

"And do you know who they are?"

"Not all of them. Rumor has it that there were once seven but this number dwindled down to four. While we're sure of two of them: Sirius Black and his cousin Bellatrix Lestrange, we have no idea who the other two might have been. But as I've just said, I also suspect Snape of being a member but I can't prove it."

Harry filed this away and continued to question Remus about Snape. "So why is Snape free if he was a Death Eater and might have been in the Inner Circle?"

"It was revealed that Snape was the one who passed on the information that allowed your parents to go into hiding, saying that he regretted his actions in joining Voldemort," Remus told Harry, although his face said he thought differently about Snape's excuse. "Dumbledore defended him."

Harry had thought that Dumbledore's actions could no longer shock him but he was wrong. "He defended someone who was a Death Eater?"

"Dumbledore said that Snape had truly repented and that he trusted him," Remus said, letting disgust color his voice. "That's when my own trust in Dumbledore began to dissipate."

"But you trusted him up until then, didn't you?"

Remus had a fairly good idea of what was going on in Harry's mind as he answered him. "Just like Sirius, I would have trusted Dumbledore with my life, which is why I told you that you have to be careful about who you do trust."

Harry confirmed Remus' suspicions about what Harry was thinking when Harry somewhat nervously met Remus' eyes. "I know you've sworn an oath to tell me the truth, and you're supposed to be trying to help me, and I know that Aunt Molly trusts you, but how do I know for sure that you really can be trusted? How do I know that you're not like Dumbledore and just want to be nice to me so that I can fight Voldemort?"

"A very wise comment, and given your well-founded point, I think yet another oath is in order," Remus said as he withdrew his wand. "I, Remus John Lupin, swear on my life and my magic that I have nothing but your best interests at heart."

As a white light washed over Remus, Harry felt a great deal more comfortable. "Sorry, but even with what you're doing, I still had to be sure."

"I totally understand, and believe me, Harry, when I say that the last thing I want for you is to be fighting against Voldemort," Remus assured him. "And most definitely not against someone as dangerous as Snape."

Harry proved how perceptive he could be with his next comment. "You don't like him, do you?"

"Never have done, not even as a first year," Remus easily admitted.

"Why not?"

"When Snape joined Hogwarts, it was rumored that he already knew a great deal of Dark Magic. Whether he did or not, I don't know. But it didn't take him long to turn on us Gryffindors. And so eventually a rivalry grew between him and us, more so between Snape, and Sirius and your father."

"What about you?"

"I didn't like Snape but I didn't openly harass him like Sirius and James did."

Harry wasn't entirely sure he wanted to hear anything negative about his father but he had to know the truth. "Dad was mean to him?"

"Not without provocation, although occasionally he went too far," Remus had to admit. "Sirius was worse. He hated Snape with every fiber in his body, and he proved it."

"How?" Harry asked, more than a little intrigued.

"Sirius led him to where I was transforming," Remus said, watching horror register on Harry's face. "Your dad saved Snape's life."

"So Black was as evil as Snape back then, even though you didn't know it at the time," Harry commented as he drew his own conclusion from Remus' revelation.

Remus was not surprised that Harry thought that. "I don't honestly know. When it happened, Sirius claimed that he thought it would be funny to frighten Snape. But when I consider how he turned out, I still wonder if he knew it could have turned deadly."

"If he let my family die, then I bet he knew," Harry said, convinced that Sirius must have known what he was doing.

"In all honesty, I sometimes still find it hard to believe that Sirius was capable of betraying your family to Voldemort, but we both know he did, and all because of the prophecy," Remus said.

Harry remembered then that Remus still had not broken the prophecy down for him. "So how did Voldemort know it was about me?"

"Because of your birth date," Remus said. "Only one other child could have been the possible child of prophecy, and Voldemort decided it wasn't him."

"Do you know who else it could have been?" Harry asked, intrigued.

"Neville Longbottom," Remus revealed. "Just like your mother, up until then the Longbottoms had defied Voldemort on more than one occasion."

Harry was intrigued but he was more interested in his mother's actions. "So when did Mum defy him?"

"Lily was attacked by Voldemort one day in Diagon Alley when she refused to let him by and into a store where families were buying Christmas gifts. Voldemort almost killed her that day, and only quick treatment by Snape saved her life."

Given what Remus had just told him about Snape's suspected loyalties, Harry's mouth dropped open. "Snape saved my mum?"

"He did," Remus confirmed. "And while I know you don't like him, he's probably the most talented Potions Master there is, and, as such, extremely knowledgeable about the curse that hit Lily and what was needed to counteract it."

Harry snorted. "Probably invented it himself."

"Probably," Remus had to agree.

Harry was not really surprised that Remus thought the same as he did. "So when did the next time happen?"

"The second occurrence happened when Lily was at dinner with your father. James was seriously injured, and Lily refused to let Voldemort finish him off. That time, only the arrival of Aurors, alerted by a ring that James wore, saved them both. However, no-one knows for sure when the third time was, but we believe it was the night your home was attacked."

Having now solved this part of the prophecy, Harry queried another part. "The prophecy said something about marking me. How?"

"I'm not entirely sure but I think it was talking about your scar." Remus pointed to Harry's forehead. "However, I have no idea why this would make you an equal or what the power the Dark Lord knows not is."

Just as baffled, Harry moved onto the part that had chilled him the most. "And what about the last bit about surviving?"

"You both can't survive, so one of you has to die," Remus said, his voice grave. "When it comes down to it, Harry, I believe that either you're going to have to kill him, or he's going to kill you."

"He's already tried twice," Harry said, a shiver going down his spine. "So how am I supposed to beat him? I wasn't able to stand up to Quirrell or Voldemort or whatever they were, either in the Forest or on the train, so I've got no chance of beating him or even a normal grown wizard."

"I'm well aware of that, and when you're old enough I'm going to arrange for you to have some training," Remus said.

Harry remembered the letter he had been given by Amelia Bones during his visit to Susan's home. "Amelia wants me to have some training next year."

Remus frowned. "What sort of training?"

"Just sitting in on some trainee Auror classes and some basic defense lessons," Harry said. "She gave me a letter for the Weasleys to get their permission."

Remus debated what Harry had told him before answering him. "I think I'm going to tell Molly and Arthur that it would be a good idea. You're definitely not ready for the sort of things Unspeakables are taught, and..."

Harry interrupted him. "Why not?"

"Because some of the things we know aren't suitable for you to be practicing just yet."

Harry was far from satisfied with Remus' answer, and so he repeated his question. "Why not?"

Remus set out to explain his reticence with a little bit of history. "Unspeakables get their names from a group of spells that were once known as 'the Unspeakables' – these were spells that only they were authorized to use. Now only three of the spells are still classified as illegal: the Unforgivables, as they are modernly known."

Harry knew about the Killing Curse, but not the others. "What are they?"

"The Killing Curse... the incantation is 'Avada Kedavra'; the Imperius curse, which allows you to force someone to do something they might not normally do, and the incantation for it is 'Imperio'; and the pain curse, the incantation for which is 'Crucio'." Remus then explained the implications of their use. "The casting of any one of these spells will mean that you'll end up in Azkaban if you're not authorized to use them."

"And you can use them?" Harry asked.

Remus nodded. "As an Unspeakable I can use any spell I deem necessary to get the job done."

"Can I use any spell I like now that I'm a pretend Unspeakable?" Harry asked, half joking and expecting a flat 'no'.

Remus sought to let Harry that there was nothing pretend about his appointment. "Harry, despite what I said about your age, you're a real Unspeakable."

"I thought this was just for looking at the prophecy," Harry said, shock coloring his voice.

Remus shook his head. "No, and obviously under normal circumstances, especially given your age, your appointment would never have taken place. But you, like every other Unspeakable, have something to offer that comes from being someone special or having a special talent."

Harry scowled. "I thought you just swore you only had my best interests..."

Remus interrupted him. "I do, Harry, but given what I suspected you might have to do at some point in the future, I deemed it a necessary evil to bring you into our ranks."

"And Ignotus agreed?" Harry asked, still more than a little curious as to whom the leader of the Unspeakables might be.

"Ignotus thought it would be a good idea but it was only because I suggested it," Remus said, his voice heavy with guilt. "Harry, I hate the idea of you eventually learning what I know but having fought in the last war, I'm also well aware that if you have to face Voldemort again, you're going to need every advantage possible to take him down, which is why I spoke to Ignotus about you."

Harry could see where Remus was coming from, but he had a question. "Why can't someone else take him on? You're much stronger than I am."

"Because you're the one prophesied to do it," Remus said in a grave voice. "And once set in motion, prophecies are always fulfilled."

Harry pulled a disbelieving face. "Always?"

Remus could understand Harry's skepticism. "I'm afraid so."

"But there must be one that hasn't," Harry argued.

"If there is, then I don't know of it," Remus told him. "And that's pretty much going back to the dawn of magic."

Harry continued to argue against his fate. "But prophecy or no prophecy, we both know that I can't beat him."

"Not right now, no. But as I've just said, once you're old enough, you'll be taught everything I know," Remus assured him. "And it's this that will hopefully give you the edge you need to beat him." Remus placed both hands on Harry's shoulders. "Harry, I know how afraid you are and that you shouldn't have to bear such a burden like this at your age, but I swear that I'll do everything I can to help you."

"So I'm really going to learn how to use the Unforgivables?" Harry asked, although he was rather nervous at the idea of using something that had been judged so wrong in wizarding society.

Remus nodded again. "I think you have to, Harry, just to survive, although at the moment I doubt you could cast any of them yet. You don't have the necessary power, or at least I don't think you do. We'll find out shortly."

Harry half hoped that he might not ever be powerful enough. The memory of the Killing Curse coming at him and Hermione was still very fresh in his mind, and he couldn't ever imagine using a spell like that on anyone, not even on Voldemort. "How?"

Remus put up his hood. "By coming with me."

Harry was duly led out of Remus' office and back through the spinning room to another room, which was not very big and had two stands in it. "What are they for?"

"They measure your magical power on the Magus scale," Remus said.

Harry wondered how it was measured. "So how does the Magus scale work?"

Remus began to explain. "The Magus scale registers by numbers. A Muggle would register at zero to twelve; a squib at thirteen to eighteen; an above-average Muggle-born usually registers at somewhere between one hundred & eighty and two hundred; and an above-average pure-blood at between one hundred & ninety and two hundred & ten. Most wizards come in at around the one hundred & seventy mark, regardless of their blood purity."

"So how does it register how powerful you are?" Harry asked.

"Go stand over there and look at the square counter," Remus instructed. He then stepped over to the other stand, on which sat a large golden globe, and he placed his hands on it. A small golden square lit up in front of him telling him that he had scored exactly two hundred and twenty.

A similar figure appeared on the square that was in front of Harry, and he looked down as the stand beeped. "Two hundred and twenty?"

Remus stepped down. "To be an Unspeakable, you have to register at over two hundred and ten."

"So you're a pure-blood?" Harry asked, having forgotten that Remus had told him that his father was a Muggle-born.

Remus shook his head. "No, a half-blood, but I think my condition might have something to do with my power." He pointed at the scale. "Your turn."

Before he placed his hands on the globe, Harry turned to Remus. "What would be a normal reading for someone of my age?"

"Because your magic is not fully mature, and regardless of your blood purity, I would expect you to register at somewhere between one hundred and one hundred & fifteen," Remus estimated. "And don't get worrying, as with everything else so far, you've been granted a dispensation as to the power level to be an Unspeakable."

Harry hoped he would not be lower than Remus' estimate, and he put his hands on the globe just as Remus had done. Harry was thoroughly relieved at the numbers that appeared. "I'm above average!"

"And you'll get stronger every year," Remus said, only half-surprised by the score of one hundred and thirty nine that had appeared. "I'll check it again during the Christmas holidays." He hesitated. "...if you want to spend some time with me, of course."

Now satisfied that Remus wasn't helping him for his own ends, Harry nodded happily. "I would."

"Then I'll arrange it with Molly," Remus said.

Harry stepped down from the stand. "What sort of power do you need to be able to cast an Unforgivable?"

"The Imperius curse is probably the easiest to master," Remus said as he indicated that Harry should follow him back to his office. "Given your current power level I expect that you would be able to cast it now."

"And the others?" Harry asked, as he held onto Remus' arm as they once more re-entered the spinning room.

"One moment," Remus said, before identifying himself and Harry.

Upon re-entering his office, Remus continued to answer Harry's question. "I'm not sure if you could cast the Cruciatus yet or not, but I suspect you could but only at a low level one. However, you've got to really want to hurt someone for the spell to work."

Not being a big fan of pain, Harry couldn't ever imagine being successful at casting the Cruciatus, and so he moved onto the Killing Curse. "And the last one?"

"If you were to cast it at me right now, the worst damage you would probably do is to burst a blood vessel or bruise me," Remus said. "And you'd need to be channeling all of your negatives emotions while you cast the spell to do that."

"I don't understand," Harry said.

"If I asked you to think about your aunt while you cast the spell, that would cause a negative emotion to flow through you as you cast the spell – it is these destructive feelings that power the spell," Remus said by means of a simple explanation.

"And how does casting it make you feel?" Harry asked, wondering if feeling a negative emotion while casting a spell had a downside.

Remus thought for a moment before telling Harry the truth. "It has an effect opposite to what you might think. When you cast the Killing Curse it gives you a heady rush of adrenaline. You feel as though you could conquer the world, and the feeling can become addictive." He also then gave Harry a warning. "By the way, casting any Unforgivable spell when combined with using other Dark Magic has some nasty side-effects. Not only can you become addicted to Dark Magic, but when you first start casting the spells, your eyes turn black. This eventually stops if you do it often enough, which means you're addicted. And the most important thing to remember is that if you become addicted, you'll begin to change. You won't be the same person you once were."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, not getting what Remus was trying to tell him.

"Dark Magic twists your personality," Remus told him. "I know of more than one Unspeakable who couldn't handle the pressure of using Dark Magic and they became addicted: They changed from being open, trustworthy people who I would have trusted with my life, to people who were deceitful, sly, and hiding the fact that they had a problem."

"Is there a cure?"

Remus nodded. "As long as they're not completely immersed, which is rare, we can use withdrawal, almost like a Muggle coming off drugs. It's painful and unfortunately the chances are that these people will slip again. As it was, they were obliviated and returned to their original lives with no knowledge of what happened to them."

"And what happens if they do Dark Magic again?"

"They're all kitted out with rings that they're not aware of," Remus explained. "If they ever cast a level eight spell, we'll know and can intervene again."

"Will they get into trouble for it?"

Remus shook his head. "Not unless they kill someone."

"But don't you think that's a little unfair?"

"We all know the risks when we sign up to become Unspeakables, including the possibility of what might happen when we use such spells," Remus said, having himself signed an agreement that he understood the risks.

"But I didn't know, and you said I'm an Unspeakable now," Harry countered.

"That's why I just told you about it," Remus told Harry. "However, before we begin to use the Unforgivables, you will have to sign a waiver to say that you understand the risks. But I promise that I'll be with you every step of the way to make sure that you don't end up on a slippery slope."

Harry wasn't entirely sure he was happy about this. "And so what happens if I say that I don't want to use the spells or to be an Unspeakable?"

"Then you don't have to be Unspeakable, and I can't and would never force you to perform any sort of magic that you're not comfortable with," Remus promised, before he added his opinion. "But to be honest I think you're going to have to master both the Unforgivables and Dark Magic in order to defeat Voldemort."

Now that he knew more about Dark Magic, Harry had a question about Voldemort. "Was Voldemort addicted?"

"He was beyond addicted, I'd say he was completely immersed, and he was also a master of Dark Magic," Remus said.

This gave Harry more food for thought and he became quiet as he began to assimilate everything Remus had told him, only looking up

when the scrape of a chair told him that Remus had risen to his feet. "Are we going somewhere?"

"No," Remus said as he moved towards the wall. "I want to get something to give to you." When the wall slid back, Remus took out the piece of parchment he had taken from George. "I've decided to give you this, Harry."

"That map thingy?" Harry asked, recalling what he had seen at the Weasleys.

Remus nodded. "It's called the Marauders Map and it will show you where everyone is in Hogwarts. I'll feel better knowing that you have it should anything untoward happen while you're at school. Combined with the knowledge you have of the Hufflepuff tunnel, it will help if..." Remus was hit with a strong wave of guilt from Harry and he trailed off before asking, "What have you done?"

Harry recalled Remus telling him that he would be aware if Harry was telling the truth, and so Harry decided to be honest, and he told Remus about the dragon, his friends being out at night, and meeting up with Charlie and Tula. "Are you going to tell McGonagall?"

Remus pulled a face. "Hardly, not after all the times I've used the tunnel."

"But you were in Gryffindor," Harry pointed out.

"I know," Remus said. "But to get back into the school after we'd snuck out onto the grounds, going through Hufflepuff was the best way in and out."

"But how did you know the password to the Hufflepuff common room?" Harry asked, aware that one house member could not tell a member of a different house their password.

"The Map is not just a map," Remus explained. "It also gives passwords. Don't ask me how, because I don't know. None of us was able to figure out how we managed to get the Map to show us something like that."

"Perhaps Black did and he lied," Harry suggested.

"The thought had occurred to me but Sirius did seem as stumped as we were," Remus said, before he hesitated in holding out the Map. "If I give you this, I want you to promise me that you'll only use the Map for emergencies and not for running around at night like I did."

"I promise," Harry immediately blurted out. "We only used the tunnel because it was an emergency."

"An emergency that never should have happened," Remus said sternly, watching Harry color. "But nevertheless, as you've made a promise to me, I'm still going to give the Map to you. You never know after what happened with Quirrell, it might come in handy."

"Thanks, Remus," Harry said, barely able to wait to get his hands on the Map. "Can I tell the others about it?"

"You can decide after I make a slight confession," Remus said as he passed the Map over and also reminded Harry of the phrases to open and close it. "I originally intended to remove any knowledge of the tunnel from your friends as I said I would, and so I revisited your friends after they had been spoken to by Bones, and I used Legilimency on them. I'm not as expert as some people, but..."

"Um, what's Legilimency?"

"A way of invading someone's mind," Remus said. "And there's a twin to it called Occlumency, which is the ability to protect one's mind."

"Can you do Occlumency?" Harry asked.

"Yes. It's part of an Unspeakable's standard training."

Harry wondered if anyone had already been tinkering in his head, like Dumbledore. "What does it feel like?"

"I can show you."

"Okay."

Remus therefore looked Harry directly in the eye. "I have to use my wand for this, but an accomplished Legilimens doesn't, nor do they need to use a vocal spell as I do. Legilimens."

Harry felt a strange pressure in his head, and then he found the memories of his and Remus' talk being invaded, making him gasp. All at once, the sensation ended. "That was horrible."

"You've never experienced anything like it before?" Remus asked.

Harry shook his head. "Definitely not."

"Good," Remus said. "Because going back to our earlier talk about Snape, you should know he's skilled at both arts."

This made Harry feel uneasy. "So he could have been poking about in my head?"

"Yes, and being an expert it might be the case you wouldn't notice," Remus said, and he made a note on a piece of parchment. "I'll put in a request to get you a ring that will provide you with some protection, although it won't help against an all-out attack." He then put down the quill. "And you should also know that Voldemort was proficient in the art."

"How do you know?" Harry asked, wondering how Remus had found out.

"An operative working undercover," Remus said, but not going into any more detail. "So, back to your friends. I didn't like using Legilimency on them but I wanted to check how trustworthy they were, to see if I needed to obliviate them or not."

"And?" Harry asked, feeling a little like a peeping tom as he waited to hear what Remus had discovered.

"I left your friends' memories of the Hufflepuff tunnel intact as, to be honest, I didn't find anything to suggest that they might be planning something nefarious," Remus said.

Harry shook his head in dismay. "I didn't think they were: we're only twelve and so they're hardly going to be planning to take over the world."

"If the rumors are correct, Voldemort was planning to do exactly that at a much earlier age," Remus said. "Harry, I know you want to trust your friends, but given what Sirius did, I needed to do this to make sure you're safe."

"So you're saying that I can trust Hermione, Justin and Susan?" Harry asked.

Remus suspected that Harry had a motive for checking. "What do you want to tell them?"

"About the prophecy," Harry said.

"You can and you can also tell them that I took you to view it as I knew about it because of your parents," Remus said, before adding a proviso. "But you can't tell them about being an Unspeakable or that I am one."

"I know that," Harry said, thinking that that was obvious.

"So is there anyone you're going to tell?" Remus asked, suspecting that Harry would tell more than just the trio he had mentioned.

"I'm going to tell Ron, Justin, Susan, and Hermione, and maybe the twins," Harry said in response. "But although he's done nothing wrong, I don't really trust Neville Longbottom."

"Then go with your instincts," Remus urged. "And don't tell him anything." He glanced up at a knock at the door. "I believe we have a visitor. Hood up, please, Harry."

The visitor turned out to be supply personnel, and by the time Harry returned to Remus' home, he was in possession of yet another ring in addition to his portkey - this one would prevent anyone perceiving his surface thoughts - as well as a second wand that had no spells on it, a prototype broomstick named the Vengeance, and a pair of Walk Softly Boots. "I can't believe I'm getting all this."

"Standard Unspeakable issue," Remus told him. "Except for the ring to protect your mind; we all have to be able to do it ourselves."

"Would you teach me?" Harry asked, deciding he wanted more than just the ring to rely upon.

"You're too young right now," Remus responded, before clarifying why. "If I pushed you too hard I could damage your mind, and I don't want to do that, but when you're a little older, then yes."

Satisfied with Remus' answer, Harry ran a hand over the broomstick. "I don't expect I can use this at school?"

Remus smiled at Harry's hopeful look. "You can but you'll need to take precautions before you do; the broomstick can be altered to make it look inconspicuous." Remus then went to the closet and took out a broomstick that looked just like Harry's. "I can't alter your broomstick as it's keyed to you." Remus aimed his wand at his own broomstick. "Mutatis Nimbus 2001."

Harry's eyes lit up with joy when the broomstick changed to resemble the latest broom on the market. "So I can really take mine to school?"

"You can," Remus said. "But just remember it will act in the same way as the broomstick you change it to, and please don't go using it as the Vengeance without me. I'm not sure if you could cope with the speed."

"I won't," Harry assured Remus, although he desperately wanted to take it out to check if Remus' theory was right. "But can I use it here as the Vengeance?"

"I'm afraid that the area where I live is too densely populated, so no," Remus said regretfully. "But before you go, if I get a chance, I'll take you somewhere you can use it and take you out."

Unfortunately for Harry, Remus had no chance to take him out, and Harry found himself spending a great deal of time in Remus' office, finishing off what he had left of his schoolwork that had been assigned for over the holidays. And all too soon it was time to return to the Burrow to get ready to join the others for his trip back to Hogwarts.

26th August 1992

Remus gave Harry a hug. "I'll send your trunk and Hedwig back to Hogwarts. Have you got everything you need for this week in your case?"

Harry patted the leather case that Remus had helped him to pick out a few days previously. "Yes, thank you."

"Then I'll see you at Christmas." Remus handed Harry the portkey. "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"I'll be okay." Harry wanted to do this on his own, and before he had a chance to say anything else, a familiar tug pulled him away and out of Remus' sight. When his world stopped swirling, Harry found himself on his knees just outside of the Weasley homestead.

"Harry!" A girl's cry pierced the air. "You're back."

Harry got a little embarrassedly to his feet. "Hi, Ginny."

"Mum's out at the moment but she said to tell you she'll be back in a little while," During the time that Harry had stayed at the Weasleys during the holidays, Ginny had managed to overcome her crippling shyness of him, and she was now able to converse normally with Harry. However, she still thought the sun rose and set with him. "Come on, I'll take you up."

"Okay then." Harry followed Ginny inside and up the stairs. "Where's everyone else?"

Ginny reeled off where her siblings were. "Ron's staying with Bill in Egypt, Fred and George have gone to stay with Lee, and Percy's in his room."

Harry placed his case on the floor. "Have you had a good few weeks? Luna said in her letters that you've been over there a lot."

"There wasn't much else to do," Ginny admitted. "But even Luna isn't there right now. She's gone Snorkack hunting again!"

Harry was unable to miss the look of disdain that crossed Ginny's face. "You don't believe in them, do you?"

"No! Who would?" Ginny was suddenly hit with the realization that Harry might. "Do you?"

"Not really." Harry answered in the negative, despite the evidence that Luna might have a basis for their existence. "And when I asked Remus about them, he snorted."

Ginny laughed. "So he doesn't believe them in either then?"

Harry shook his head. "No, he doesn't." Harry looked around. "Should I put my stuff in the same place?"

"Yeah." Ginny pointed to a rather dilapidated cupboard that had been painted bright orange by Ron. "I'll help, and then we can go downstairs for some biscuits."

Harry let Ginny help him, before the two of them headed back downstairs. "I've never known it to be this quiet here."

"It's been boring." Ginny munched happily on a large chocolate biscuit that she had grabbed out of the biscuit barrel, and then she changed the subject. "Do you have your broomstick with you?"

"Yep, Remus shrank it for me." Harry had forgotten about it when he had unpacked. "It's in the side pocket of my case."

"Could I... could I possibly have a go?" Ginny's face turned a pretty shade of pink, her newly found confidence in front of Harry receding a little from nerves.

"Course you can." Harry dashed back upstairs before returning with two miniaturized broomsticks. "I almost forgot. Remus got me a new broomstick. But your Mum will have to unshrink them before we can use them."

Ginny smirked, her self-assurance returning in spades. "No, she won't." Aiming her wand at the broomsticks, she used an enlarging spell. "There."

"But what about the underage magic restrictions?" Harry asked in a worried voice.

"This wand is second-hand." Ginny tucked it in her belt. "It belonged to Mum's Great Aunt Drusilla, and it hasn't got any charms on it."

"Oh." Harry wished his main wand had nothing on it, but Remus had been adamant about keeping the charms on it, and Harry had been warned that his secondary wand was for emergencies only. "Let's go outside. You can use my new broomstick."

Ginny did not need telling twice, and grabbing Harry's broomstick from him, she hurried outdoors.

Harry followed Ginny on his old Nimbus 2000 for quite some time while she whipped around the large open field that surrounded the Burrow. "You're pretty good."

"I practice," Ginny yelled behind her, before she finally realized how long she had been on the broomstick, and she regretfully landed. "Sorry, I shouldn't have hogged it for so long but it was fun to be able to practice on a decent broom for a change." It was only then that she looked at it properly. "A Nimbus 2001? These only just came out."

"I know," Harry acknowledged, and he then changed the subject as he took back the broomstick. "How do you practice normally?"

Ginny gave a guilty giggle. "I know how to pick locks. The twins taught me, so when Mum is out I use the trick to get me into the cupboard where the twins lock up their brooms. But they've taken their brooms with them to Lee's place so I haven't been able to use them."

"That's how you know you stand a chance at quidditch, isn't it?" Harry recalled the conversation that had taken place at Christmas.

"Yep." Ginny took Harry's older broomstick from him. "I think it's my turn to fly this."

"I haven't had a chance to fly on this yet." Harry got onto his new broomstick and flew into the air, spending nearly as much time as Ginny had in the air before touching down. "That was brilliant."

"Can you show me how you do that twist where you look as though you're going to go upside down?" Ginny had never seen a move like it before.

"Course I will. In fact you can ride with me." Harry hopped back onto his broomstick. "Get on behind me."

Ginny eagerly climbed on behind Harry and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I'm on."

"Hold tight," Harry warned, and then he left the ground, quickly gathering speed before he gained a little more height and tilted sideways with a strange wiggle before righting himself.

Ginny laughed with pleasure, and once they had touched down, she tried the maneuver herself, managing a passable copy on her third attempt. Then she sank slowly back down to the ground. "I'm starving. Let's go back in and get some more biscuits."

Once inside, Harry took a custard cream, one of his favorites, and he sat down on the sofa next to Ginny. "You really are pretty good on a broom."

Ginny grabbed another biscuit. "I know but I'm not famous like you so I doubt I'll get a chance at making the team as a first year."

"If you could get on a team I think you would be a brilliant chaser," Harry commented, ignoring Ginny's remark about his being famous. "But Gryffindor already has really good chasers, and I know you would have to become a reserve."

"What about Ravenclaw?" Ginny knew she was not clever enough for Ravenclaw, but she was still interested in their team.

"Their chasers are all pretty good, and none of them are leaving this year as far as I know." Harry wrinkled his forehead. "And I know you can't want to be in Slytherin."

"No way," Ginny agreed with Harry.

"And I can't really see you getting into Hufflepuff," Harry continued, "although we could do with more chasers."

Ginny's temper immediately flared up at Harry's rejection. "Why not? Aren't I good enough?"

"It isn't that." Harry worked to calm her down. "It's just that most of the people in Hufflepuff are really quite quiet, and even though you seem that way at first, you're really not."

"So I'm noisy as well as not good enough?" Ginny snarled, having turned bright red with anger.

"No, but you're quite, um, quite, um..." Harry struggled for the right words, his face a picture of worry and dismay.

Seeing how distressed Harry had become, Ginny quickly recognized that unlike her brothers, Harry was not trying to be mean to her, and she therefore relented. "It's all right, Harry. I know what you mean."

Harry let out a relieved puff of air. "I was worried I'd upset you."

"Not really." Ginny rose to her feet. "Come on, I promised Mum I'd peel potatoes before she got home, and she's due back in fifteen minutes."

Glad to have the subject steered in a different direction, Harry followed Ginny into the kitchen.

Next Chapter: Harry returns to school; Hermione has dismal news; Ron tries out for seeker.

Apologies for the huge delay in finally posting again but RL got in the way and I still have no internet, so posting will be intermittent, maybe once or twice a fortnight until this problem is resolved. But I won't be giving on this story and update schedules will be included on my profile.

Chapter 21: The Diary

"Are you sure you've got everything, Harry?" Molly fussed around the dark-haired boy.

"Remus has already sent pretty much of all my stuff ahead, Aunt Molly." Harry picked up his small case. "This is all I need. Uncle Arthur shrank my brooms last night."

"Good, then we're all set." Molly opened the door. "Harry, you can ride with Ginny and the trunks. I'll ride with Percy. I'm just glad that Ron and the twins aren't here. This would have been a madhouse."

Harry knew that despite her words, Molly had missed her other children, and that she would have been happy to see them there. He stepped aside as Percy officiously swept through. Harry didn't really know the older boy that well, and to be truthful, he had no desire to either. Hiding a grin at Ginny's eyebrow waggling, Harry followed the younger girl into the taxi.

A short time later they were all safely on Platform Nine and Three Quarters, and Harry spotted Susan. "Susan!"

Molly winced at the loud yell. "Harry, please."

"Sorry, Aunt Molly." Harry had had to raise his voice to make himself heard over the noise of the people on the platform.

Susan came barreling over. "Harry, I missed you."

Harry wrapped the girl in a bear hug, missing the jealous look that crossed Ginny's face. After releasing Susan, he smiled. "It just wasn't the same writing, was it?"

"Not really." Susan then remembered her manners, and she held out her hand towards Mrs. Weasley. "It's nice to see you again."

"And you." Molly ignored the hand and gave Susan a hug. "And you remember Ginny."

"Of course." Susan held out her hand again.

This time it was accepted, and Ginny shook it briefly, Harry asking, "Did you have a good few weeks after I left?"

"It was amazing," Susan gushed. "Aunt Amy took me to Australia with her. She was lecturing to the Sydney and Adelaide Auror Divisions about BritAD's latest techniques. Next year they're coming here to do the same, so I won't have to go away. And Aunt Amy said to tell you that you're going to be staying with us, Harry."

There was no opportunity for Harry to respond, because Molly checked the time and decided it was time that the children were making a move. "I think you had better get onboard." Molly pulled Ginny into a hug. "Promise me that you won't get worrying about what house you get into."

"I won't." Ginny hugged her mother back. "I'll see you at Christmas."

Molly then hugged Harry. "You try and keep out of trouble this year."

"I will, Aunt Molly." Harry turned and opened the closest door, standing aside to let Ginny and Susan on in front of him. "After you."

After shoving their trunks into the empty compartment, Susan and Ginny climbed quickly inside, and Harry got in behind them. No sooner had he done so than the train let out an almighty whistle, and the conductor yelled out, "Final call. All aboard."

The last few stragglers hurriedly joined their friends onboard the train, and moments later the bright red locomotive belched out a puff of steam and began to pull out of the station.

Harry and Ginny sat down together after waving at Molly. "Where was your aunt, Susan?"

"She left just before you arrived." Susan removed her lightweight jacket. "I was about to get on the train when you called me."

"I wonder where Justin and Hermione are." Harry debated whether he should get up and go looking for them.

He didn't have to, for a few minutes into the journey, they came to him. After an exchange of hugs, an introduction to Ginny, and a removal of personal items from the compartment the two of them

had been seated in, Hermione and Justin stowed their things in Harry's compartment, and Hermione gratefully sat down. "Where's Hedwig?"

"Remus sent her ahead for me." Harry glanced at the cage that Justin was toting. "When did you get her?"

"She's a he!" Justin poked a finger through the cage, and tickled the head of the mottled brown owl. "Mum bought Sherlock for me as an early birthday present because she won't see me in November."

Justin's mention of birthdays made Harry remember his own. "Thanks for the new shirts you sent me." Harry's quidditch shirt had been damaged when he had been ploughed into the ground in the game against Slytherin; Justin had sent him a set of two for his birthday. "And the broom polishing kit was brilliant, Hermione."

"Hedwig turned up out of nowhere," Hermione repeated for Justin and Susan what had happened. "I was in France wondering how I was going to get Harry's gift to him as I totally forgot to give it to him when we dropped him off at Susan's, when I heard a hoot, and there she was. What did you get him?"

Unlike almost everything else he had received, Susan's gift to Harry had not been quidditch orientated. "I bought him an Auror class holster ready for next year."

With Ginny already aware of why Susan had bought the gift, Hermione and Justin looked expectantly at Harry, who began to explain. "I've got a visitor's pass for the whole of next summer so that I can have a look around the Ministry and British Auror Division. Madam Bones signed off on it."

"A pass?" Hermione queried. "I thought anyone could go into the Ministry."

"They can," Susan said. "But only authorized visitors can go into BritAD and also see the Minister's office. And..."

"You're going to get to see the Minister's office?" Hermione squawked, interrupting Susan. "You're so lucky."

"I've already seen it." Ginny joined in with the conversation. "Dad showed it to me sneakily one day when he took me into work. But I was pretty young, and don't really remember that much about it."

"I'm more interested in seeing Auror Division." Harry was not that concerned about visiting the Minister's office, Remus already having taken him around the Ministry, although he had refused to take Harry into the death chamber, worried about jogging his memories.

"So why is Harry getting to see it?" Justin asked, more than a little jealous.

"Well, he's what Aunt Amy calls high profile," Susan said. "And she thinks a little training might help him in case anything like what happened at the end of first year happens again. And so Harry is going to be spending two weeks sitting in on classes and stuff like that."

"Will you be there as well?" Justin asked, a little jealous about Harry's opportunity.

"No, it's just for Harry and Ron." Susan was not particularly interested in attending, not even to spend time with Harry.

"Ron?" Justin echoed, surprised to hear the Gryffindor's name.

"Aunt Molly didn't want me going alone," Harry explained hurriedly, hoping that Justin wouldn't be upset. "So she told Amelia that I could only attend if Ron did."

"They'll be staying at our house for the fortnight." Susan then addressed her next remark purely to Harry. "It's set up for after the fortnight you get back from school. Aunt Amy thought you might want to spend some time with your friends outside of school first."

Speaking of friends made Harry realize that one of his friends was missing from the compartment. "That reminds me, I almost forgot about Luna. I'd better go and look for her."

Ginny waved off his suggestion. "She'll be okay. I expect she's probably with some of the other first years."

Harry wavered, not really wanting to have to contend with a group of first year girls who, if his experiences so far remained true, Harry knew would be falling over themselves to meet him, and he therefore sat back down. "Perhaps I'll wait until we get to Hogwarts then." But after a short time, he decided that he just couldn't ignore the fact that the girl was on the train, and he got back up. "I'm going to look for Luna. If she's busy, I can just wave and keep on walking."

Harry then left the carriage, but the first person he came across was not Luna, it was Ron. "Hi, ya."

"Harry!" Ron was delighted to see his friend, and pumped his hand vigorously. "Where are you sitting?"

"Fourth carriage from the front with Justin and the girls." Harry glanced over Ron's shoulder into the window of the compartment the redhead had just exited; Dean and Seamus were in there, together with Neville. "How was your holiday with Bill?"

Ron's smile grew even bigger. "It was brilliant and..."

Sitting in the compartment, Neville forced himself to smile brightly when Harry entered the compartment alone, Ron having finished his longwinded speech about everything he had done and then continuing on to his original destination, the loo. "Hi, Harry."

"Neville, Seamus, Dean." Harry greeted each boy before sitting down at Seamus' request. "How are you all?"

All three boys informed Harry that they were okay, and then Dean drew Seamus into a separate conversation, leaving Harry to talk to Neville. "So did you have a good holiday?"

"It was good," Neville said, and then he realized he had failed to ask after Harry's health. "How are you doing now?"

"I'm fine," Harry assured him.

Silence prevailed for a short time until Ron came back in a few moments later, and Neville decided he would share Ron's news. "Ron's thinking about trying out as seeker."

Seamus grinned happily at Ron. "That's brilliant, Ron. What made you decide to have a go?"

Ron had not wanted to tell anyone about his decision until he had made up his mind for sure, but now he had little choice. "Nev seems to think I'd be good at it. I've been practicing at his house."

Having seen Ron seek at the Burrow, Harry was not so sure of his chances, but wanting to be a good friend, Harry backed up Neville. "I think you stand a good chance."

Harry's words of encouragement were all Ron needed. "In that case, I'll have a go."

"It'll be fun," Harry enthused, deciding that maybe Ron had improved since he had last seen him. "We can practice together."

Even though he had promised himself in his mind that he would not try and stop Ron from spending time with Harry, Neville discovered that in reality the very opposite was true. "Won't that be considered cheating since you're both in different houses?"

Ron and Harry both looked at each other, before Seamus shrugged and spoke up. "Nah, everyone knows that Harry and Ron are mates."

In the wake of Seamus' comment, Neville had little choice except to subside. "I suppose."

As silence fell over the boys, Harry remembered his original reason for leaving his own compartment, and he got to his feet. "I'd better go. I'm supposed to be looking for Luna. Have you seen her, Ron?"

Ron shook his head. "Sorry, mate. See you later."

"See you." Harry grinned before closing the compartment door behind him, continuing down the train until he found Luna sitting alone. He slid open the door. "Hi, Luna. Aren't you with any friends?"

"No." Luna's voice was rather forlorn. "Two girls did sit with me when I first got on the train but after we'd been talking for a while, they suddenly remembered they were supposed to be somewhere else."

Harry now felt guilty for not seeking her out earlier. "Sorry, I should have come and looked for you sooner."

"I suppose you didn't want everyone staring at you," Luna deduced quite correctly.

"I didn't." Harry had had a few uncomfortable moments when he had passed several groups and whispering had sprung up. "Do you want to come and sit with us? I'm sitting with Justin, Hermione, Susan and Ginny near the front of the train."

"I'm really all right here," Luna said bravely. "You don't have to look after me."

For once, a usually obtuse Harry read between the lines, and he tugged Luna's trunk from under the seat. "Follow me."

A now smiling Luna followed the boy she considered her best friend. Once inside the compartment where Harry's friends were, she waved at the children sitting there. "Hello everyone, I'm Luna Lovegood."

Hermione took in the girl's rather haphazard clothing, the strange necklace she was wearing that appeared to be made of teeth, and what could only be her wand sticking out of her hair, and she immediately decided that the girl was as batty as her letters to Harry made her out to be. But she was a polite girl, and she therefore stood up with her hand held out. "I'm Hermione Granger."

"You're in Gryffindor, aren't you?" Luna shook Hermione's hand.

Hermione thought it rather obvious seeing as she was wearing a Gryffindor tie, but she refrained from commenting on it. "I am. What house do you want to get into?"

"Hufflepuff so that I can be with Harry but I know I'm going into Ravenclaw," Luna announced.

Hermione's face was a picture. "How do you know that?"

"Mummy told me before she died," Luna blithely informed Hermione, totally unaware that Hermione thought that divination and the like was complete hokum.

"Okay." Hermione shared a look with Ginny, who was doing her best to hide her giggles.

Luna failed to notice the shared look, and she went on to greet both Susan and Ginny personally. "Hi Susan, Ginny."

Both girls bid her hello, before Luna turned her beaming smile on an almost frightened looking Justin. "You're Justin, aren't you?"

"Yes." Justin held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"Can I sit next to you?" After shaking his hand, Luna sat down without waiting for Justin to answer.

Ginny smothered yet another snort of laughter at the look on Justin's face, and she answered for him. "You can sit wherever you want, Luna."

"Thanks, Ginny." And with that, Luna whipped out a magazine and began to read it.

Justin recognized it as the Quibbler, but not really wanting to talk to the girl, he wisely declined from commenting on the fact that Luna was holding the magazine upside down.

It obviously didn't bother Luna; she continued to read the magazine, before she eventually nodded off.

Soon everyone except for Harry and Hermione were asleep. Harry immediately took his friend to task. "Hermione, is something wrong? You haven't looked at a single book."

Needing someone to confide in, Hermione shifted closer to Harry so that she would not wake up Susan. "Mummy and Daddy told me last week that they're getting divorced."

Harry was a little unsure what to say but his main concern was his friend. "I'm so sorry."

A tear trickled down Hermione's cheek. "I've got to choose who I want to live with."

Harry frowned. "Can't you spend time with them both?"

"Mummy said if I wanted to live with her then I had to give up coming to Hogwarts. Daddy said that wasn't true and then they began arguing," Hermione said, another tear running down her cheek. "Mummy said she wants me to go to a normal school, but I don't want to."

"I don't want you to either," Harry assured her.

"Neither does Daddy," Hermione told him. "So I said I wasn't giving up going to Hogwarts, and so Mummy said she wouldn't see me until I changed my mind."

"Perhaps she's just trying to frighten you," Harry said.

"She didn't even come to say goodbye at the station," Hermione said, and then she burst into tears.

Harry put his arm around Hermione and she let him tug her against his shoulder, her sobs being muffled by his shirt. Across the compartment, Justin opened up his eyes but Harry shook his head and so Justin closed his eyes again. Once Hermione stopped crying, Harry made a suggestion. "Do you want to go for a walk up the train?"

"Not really," Hermione said, her last train ride having put her off wandering about the train. "Tell me about your stay with Remus Lupin instead."

And so Harry told her about the prophecy. "...and so either I'm going to have to kill him or he's going to kill me."

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione burst into tears again.

This time Justin's eyes opened and remained that way. "That's not good, Harry."

Ginny stirred. "What's not good?"

"Wake Luna up," Harry said, as he shook Susan awake. He then proceeded to tell the children about his time at the Ministry but not that he was an Unspeakable.

The girls were all pale by the time Harry had finished telling them, and Susan now understood more fully why her aunt had made the offer to Harry. "At least you'll get some training next year."

"I don't think it will do much good," Harry said, remembering how casual Quirrell had been in taking him on. "I've still got a long way to go, and I'm not anywhere near powerful enough to take on Voldemort."

Ginny, Susan and Luna all shivered, causing Harry to apologize. Justin's face wore a look of concern. "If there's anything I can do..."

Harry shook his head. "I don't think there's anything any of us can do, except hope that I get stronger and that Voldemort doesn't come back again, or at least not until I might stand a chance of taking him on."

The remainder of the journey was spent talking about the prophecy, Harry's power reading, and Snape, all of the children trying to come up with some idea of what might help Harry. Unfortunately though, they could come up with nothing other than hopes, and all conversation ended as the train arrived in Hogsmeade.

Once they had gotten off, Harry could hear Hagrid calling out to the first years. "Luna, you and Ginny should leave your trunks and head down to the boats. Just follow Hagrid over there."

Ginny held out her hand to Luna, who was standing watching everyone with a somewhat bemused look on her face. "Come on, Luna. We don't want to get left behind."

The two girls disappeared into the distance, and Harry and the others headed for the carriages that all the students, except for first years, used to get to the school. Once inside the school it was fun for them to watch the first years head into the Great Hall to be sorted. As she had predicted, Luna was sorted in Ravenclaw, and she waved to Harry as she skipped to her table.

The final person to be sorted was Ginny, and she climbed hesitantly onto the stool when her name was called, visibly jumping when a voice spoke to her. "Who is that?"

"I'm the Sorting Hat," the Hat told Ginny what it inevitably ended up telling all of the new students. "You don't need to talk out loud. I can hear your thoughts."

Ginny immediately went red. "All of them?"

"All of them," the Hat confirmed. "And you want to go into Hufflepuff, don't you?"

"Yes, please." Ginny's thoughts were full of hope.

"But I believe you would do much better in Gryffindor." The Hat was reluctant to place Ginny in a different house. "All of your family has been in it."

Ginny recalled what Bill had said at Christmas. "You wanted to put my brother Bill into Slytherin, but he said he refused you."

"So he did," the Hat acknowledged, "but I stand by my initial decision; William would have made an excellent addition to that house."

Ginny's thoughts became quite bossy. "Well, if you let him choose, I want to as well."

The Hat chuckled. "It's your determination that makes me believe you should be in Gryffindor, and following your own path, young lady."

"No," Ginny refused. "I want to go into Harry's house. He needs every friend he can get right now."

Since Ginny was the last to be sorted and the numbers were pretty evenly divided between the four houses, the Hat relented. "Very well then, but you should know that you can't change your mind once I've declared which house you are to go into."

Ginny didn't care about that; she was going to be in Harry's house. "I want to be in Hufflepuff."

"Then I shall grant your wish," the Hat said to Ginny before it called out, "HUFFLEPUFF".

On the Gryffindor table Percy and Ron were both stunned. The twins, however, weren't. George grinned at Fred. "I told you she'd manage it."

Fred scowled as he handed over two sickles. "I can't believe she actually talked the Hat around into letting her go into Hufflepuff."

"How do you know she did?" Ron challenged his brother's supposition.

"Because it should have been a foregone conclusion that she was in Gryffindor, but I could see she was obviously arguing with the Hat," Fred grumbled.

"But why on earth would she prefer Hufflepuff over Gryffindor?" Percy asked in a disgusted voice.

Fred rolled his eyes. "Wake up, Perce! We all know why she wanted to go into Hufflepuff, or should I say who she wanted to go into Hufflepuff for."

When Percy continued to look blankly at them, George, Fred, and Ron all chorused 'Harry' at the same time. Percy's nose wrinkled. He didn't like the boy and had done his best to avoid him at the Burrow, believing that his parents had made a bad choice by taking Harry in. "Potter's trouble and I don't think I want my sister running after him."

"You're about ten years too late," Fred sniggered.

George agreed with him. "Yeah, but it isn't Ginny I'm worried about, it's Harry."

Percy frowned. "Why are you worried about him?"

George thought that for someone who was academically gifted, Percy was sometimes rather stupid when it came down to the world in general. "Because somehow I don't think he'll be too impressed if Gin moons all over him here at school with everyone watching them."

"He'll manage." Fred's despondency over losing to George began to vanish as he thought about how tenacious his young sister was. "And if he doesn't, then at least it won't be our fault."

"Too right." George shared the same grin with Fred before turning his attention to Minerva's speech, which already begun.

"...and because of Professor Quirrell's unfortunate passing last term, we have had to find a new teacher to take his place." Minerva turned to Severus. "As a temporary measure, Professor Snape has agreed to step into the breach."

Murmurs of discontent and disappointment were forthcoming from most tables, except from Slytherin, where roars of approval ripped through the room, Crabbe putting his fingers into his mouth and whistling his endorsement. Goyle called out instead, "Why only this year?"

"Before his removal, Albus Dumbledore signed a contract with someone to take over this year as Professor Quirrell had already said he would not be teaching for another year," Minerva said, her face taking on a more than sour look. "But Gilderoy Lockhart was unable to take up the position at this time due to his upcoming book tour, and so Dumbledore had agreed to let Professor Snape take the position for a year. However, Gilderoy Lockhart will be fulfilling his contract and taking the spot up next year."

Screams of joy far louder than the sighs of disappointment filled the room as most of the girls went wild. Even Hermione had a slightly dopey look on her face. "He's absolutely brilliant. I've read all of his books."

George scowled at her. "He's an idiot."

"I have to disagree," Hermione hissed at him. "Just read his books. You'll see that he's nothing of the sort."

"It's all rubbish," George hissed back.

"You're just jealous," Hermione retorted, before turning her attention back to the Headmistress, who was continuing her speech.

"As I mentioned last term, I will be no longer be teaching Transfiguration, and Professor Felicity Gotobed is taking my place."

A very attractive young woman stood up, and there were a few ribald comments connected to her name, which soon died down at the glowering look that Minerva was directing in the offenders' direction. "Finally, to take over from Professor Snape for the year to teach potions, I am pleased to introduce Professor Margaret Weasley. She is also taking over as the temporary head of Gryffindor."

Almost all of the Weasleys and Harry were stunned to see Molly Weasley coming out from a side door. Fred groaned. "She kept that quiet."

Percy smiled widely. "She told me."

"Oh shut up!" George barked, just as fed up as his brother. "We'll have to actually do some work in school now."

Unlike the twins, Harry was rather pleased to see his new guardian, and feeling much safer knowing that someone he knew cared about him would be in Hogwarts, he clapped rather ferociously.

At the head table as Minerva reintroduced the staff, Severus Snape sat scowling. He hated the start of term, and Severus wanted nothing more than to leave the Great Hall, retire to his room, and read a good book. Thinking of a good book focused Severus' mind on another book, one he had brought to Hogwarts with him for a purpose. No longer listening to Minerva, he let his mind drift back to just before he had left for Hogwarts.

Two Days Earlier

Severus entered the room that served as his study in the small and dingy house that he had lived in for most of his life. Once inside the room, he headed to the far wall. Pointing his wand at what appeared to be a wall sconce, he cast several spells, and he then placed his hand around the sconce and tugged. A click was heard, and a small portion of wall slid back, allowing Severus access to what was inside. After withdrawing the object, Severus ran his hand over it.

To an onlooker it would have appeared simply to be a very plain book. On closer observation, one would have noted that it was actually a diary. And if one had continued to watch, then they would have seen Severus open the diary to reveal blank pages, and all

interest would have been lost: Unless of course an onlooker had any curiosity as to what they believed Severus might confess to the diary. Again they would have been disappointed for all he wrote after sitting down was: 'It's time.'

An onlooker's attention might have been regained though if they had continued to observe, for although the words maintained their integrity for a moment, they soon sank into the page and vanished. And then a response came back: 'Do not fail me.'

Severus laid down his quill, closed the diary, and placed it on top of his personal items that he was taking to Hogwarts with him. Then he went to close the lid, only to hesitate. Instead of continuing to close the lid, Severus instead lifted the diary back out. He ran a hand over it, and, despite his conversation with the diary's entrapped guest, Severus debated whether he should take it to school with him.

After the end of the last school year, he was aware that he would find it difficult to explain the diary's existence if anyone, particularly Minerva, ever discovered what the diary was. And after the Quirrell incident, Minerva would be overly protective of Potter, to say nothing of the fact that Severus had been made aware that Harry's guardian was joining the staff. Severus' mouth tightened at the thought of the dark-haired boy. By rights he, and that know-it-all Granger, should have been dead, but it had all gone horribly wrong on the Hogwarts Express, and Quirrell had instead paid the ultimate price. Shaking off his doubts, Severus replaced the diary in trunk and closed it, before leaving the room.

Present Time

As he listened to the Headmistress, Severus pondered how he was going to place the diary upon Potter's person. A cruel smile played across his lips until he stupidly allowed himself to consider how Lily would feel about her son losing his soul and probably his life. He didn't want to think about her! But it was too late. Severus' mind would not let him escape his thoughts, and Minerva again faded into the background as Severus found himself remembering the very first time he had met Lily Evans, and for a while he became lost in time past.

However, the sound of clapping drew Severus out of his memories, and he forced himself to concentrate on what Minerva was currently

saying. While he did so, he looked around the Great Hall, his eyes almost automatically seeking Potter out. The memory of Lily had made him realize that he could not place the diary on the boy. Even though she was dead, Severus couldn't bear to contemplate what Lily would think of him if he did.

He therefore began to survey the Great Hall until his gaze fell upon Ginny Weasley, who was looking at Harry as if the sun was shining from him. Severus debated whether he should slip it into her bag during class. But he knew that he would not have wanted to listen to what would probably amount to a lovesick rant about the Boy Who Lived, and with her mother on the staff he decided against using Ginny. Severus scanned the Hall once more, this time his gaze falling upon Hermione, and he almost immediately ruled her out. The girl's incessant questioning drove him to distraction, and his Master would not thank him for foisting a Mudblood on him. Severus therefore decided that the diary would need a different victim, and so, after looking around once more, he finally settled on someone else.

Next Chapter: Ron tries out for seeker; Minerva cautions Severus.

Chapter 23: A Lost Opportunity

Still in his quidditch gear, Harry sat down next to Hermione, who had been the only one of his circle of friends not to watch the Hufflepuff quidditch trials. "Hi."

"How did you do?" Hermione could see that Harry was obviously excited.

"I'm seeker again for Hufflepuff." Harry gave her a large smile. "And Justin is the reserve."

"What about Diggory?" Hermione knew that the good-looking fourth year had also been a serious contender for the position.

"Justin beat him out by one snitch." Harry couldn't help but smile all the more as he thought about his best friend's achievement.

"And how many snitches did you beat them by?" Hermione had a feeling Harry would fail to reveal his achievement without a little encouragement.

"Three." Harry had actually left one alone because he knew Justin was close enough to get it, and it had been that final snitch that had sealed Justin's spot as reserve. However, Harry declined to mention that fact - he had the feeling that Hermione might not approve. "But it's all worked out well in the end. Cedric's taken a chaser's position instead."

Hermione knew that Harry was hiding something: His voice had risen; he had responded to something she hadn't really asked; to say nothing of the fact that he had also begun to play with his hair, something he did only when he was nervous; and he would not meet her eyes. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Harry evaded the question. "What wouldn't I tell you about a quidditch trial?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "I don't know. You tell me."

"There's nothing to tell." Harry forced himself to meet Hermione's eyes. "It's not like Cedric didn't make the team."

Hermione knew for sure then that Harry had done something. "What did you do?"

Harry didn't know how Hermione knew that he had done something wrong, and he called her on it. "How do you know I did anything?"

Hermione listed everything that had made her suspect that more had happened than Harry had told her about. Then she told him about her father's philosophy. "Daddy is always saying that a person has to read between the lines, and that is what I just did. So what did you do?"

Harry decided that in future, if he needed to hide something, or to tell a lie, - not that he planned on so doing, of course - he would make a supreme effort not to display any signs of nerves, and he would look someone directly in the eye, as he did now while he owned up about what he had done. "I didn't go after a snitch that I'd spotted because I knew Justin would be able to catch it if I didn't."

"Harry!" Despite her suspicions that something underhand had gone on, Hermione was more than a little shocked at Harry's uncharacteristic deviousness. "That's cheating."

"Not exactly." Harry defended his decision. "I just ignored the snitch. Both Justin and Cedric went for it, but Justin got there first."

"Did you know that Diggory would make chaser?" Hermione questioned Harry.

"Yes," Harry said hurriedly. "I wouldn't have done it otherwise. But if I hadn't left the snitch alone, Justin wouldn't have made it onto the team as reserve, and he's been trying so hard, and Cedric would have been both reserve seeker and chaser, so it didn't seem fair. And Justin's only going to get to play if I can't, so it's not as if it was for a proper team place, and I already knew I'd caught enough snitches to make seeker when I left the last snitch alone."

Hermione had to stifle a giggle at Harry's longwinded excuse, but she had to admit that he did have a point. "Okay but don't ever do it again."

"I won't," Harry promised, and he decided that a rapid change of subject was in order. "So what are you reading?"

"It's Gilderoy Lockhart's latest book." Hermione blushed. "I thought I'd get a head start."

Harry looked at Hermione in amazement. "But he's not coming until next year."

"It doesn't hurt to be prepared." Hermione, however, closed the book and placed it in her book bag. "I'd better go and drop this lot off in Gryffindor."

"I'll go and get showered then." Harry jumped up and knocked a chair over, earning a frown from the librarian. "See you after dinner in here?"

"I'm going to have an early night." Hermione's blush, which had started to diminish, flared up again.

Harry dropped his head to hide his laughter. He had a feeling his friend was actually going to be reading about Lockhart, but probably in her room behind her bed curtains where no-one could see. "Then I probably won't see you until Charms tomorrow."

"Have you done your homework?" Hermione's voice became censorious.

"I finished it before I went to the quidditch trial." Harry opened the door for Hermione, who headed down the corridor.

"If I don't see you at dinner, I'll see you tomorrow," Hermione said before she peeled off towards the stairs.

"See you." Harry hurried back towards Hufflepuff. He couldn't wait to tell Justin what he had just caught Hermione reading.

Justin, however, was not surprised. Sitting on his bed with wet hair, he shook his head at Harry. "Sometimes I don't think that you pay attention to something unless it's right in front of you, Harry."

"Yes, I do," Harry protested, before he wrinkled his forehead and questioned Justin's comment. "Anyway, what makes you say that?"

"I think that everyone in this school is reading or wants to read 'Magical Me'." Justin picked up a sock that Harry had sent flying while he was sorting out fresh clothing.

"Have you read it yet?" Harry stopped searching for the matching sock to look at Justin.

Justin handed Harry the matching sock that had also flown in his direction. "I thought about buying it, but Hannah said I could read her copy when she's finished with it."

"It's really that good?" Harry picked up his towel.

"Supposed to be," Justin responded.

Harry decided it could not hurt to be up-to-date if everyone else was doing the same thing. "Perhaps I'll get a copy as well then."

Harry's copy of *Magical Me* arrived two days later with Hedwig. She dropped it onto the table at breakfast and stared expectantly at Harry, who smiled at her. "You want a piece of bacon, don't you?"

Hedwig glared impatiently at Harry; of course she wanted a piece of bacon. Her indignation came to an end when not only Harry, but also Justin and Susan fed her bacon off their plates. Satisfied, she rubbed her beak against Harry's cheek, before taking to the wing and returning the way she had come.

As soon as breakfast was over, Harry headed back to his bedroom. Flopping down onto his bed, he pressed a small indentation on the packet with his thumb and the book enlarged, enabling Harry to begin reading. He was still reading when Justin came in to tell him that it was lunchtime. Harry sat up and placed the book on his bedside table. He had been spellbound by its contents, but he had some doubts. "I can't possibly see how one man could have done all of this."

"He's supposed to be a brilliant wizard, and I think this just proves it." Justin had been able to borrow Hannah's book the previous day, and like Harry, he had read most of it already. Unlike Harry, however, he had no doubts about Lockhart's abilities. "And I think he's going to be an amazing teacher."

Despite his reservations, Harry had to agree. "I suppose. I wonder if he'll show us how to do some of the spells he's used."

"I should imagine so," Justin said hopefully. "Come on, lunch is being served and I'm starving."

Harry's stomach growled at him. "So I am. I can finish this later."

After lunch, Harry and Justin joined their other friends, except for Luna, who was in the hospital wing suffering from a particularly bad bout of Muggle flu. And Harry's concerns were addressed by Hermione, who dismissed them as 'really silly', citing what their former Headmaster had done in his lifetime to give Harry something to which to compare Lockhart's own endeavors. After finishing their homework, the group disbanded, both Harry and Justin intending to finish 'Magical Me'.

Once they had finished reading, Harry dropped the book into his trunk. "I still think it's a little bit much for one person, no matter what Hermione thinks."

"I don't." Justin put down the book and picked up another he had on his bedside table. "Look at this."

Harry took the book from Justin. "Break With a Banshee?"

"It's about his time spent in Ireland." Justin told Harry what Hannah had told him. "And he's written nine or ten other books; I can't remember their names though."

Harry opened the book and skimmed through its contents. "It's more about what's he done. He must have spent every minute of his lifetime defeating these creatures."

"He probably has." Justin took back the book. "He's an honorary member of the Dark Force Defense League, a group that fights against Dark Magic and evil."

"You seem to know a lot about him," Harry teased Justin.

Justin went red. "Hannah and Susan told me all about him."

Harry got up from his bed. "I need a break from Lockhart. I'm going to fly circuits. Do you want to come?"

Justin shook his head. "I want to start reading this book. Hannah's already promised it to Susan, and I need to get through it."

Harry went to the bathroom, before returning to pick up his broomstick. "I'll see you later then."

Justin didn't respond. He had already immersed himself in the world of Gilderoy Lockhart and his daring feats. Harry groaned under his breath. "This can't last much longer." Shaking his head, he left the room.

But Harry was wrong. The Lockhart Phenomena, as one of the teachers called it, only got worse as the first few weeks of term went by. Students could not only be seen toting 'Magical Me' around, but also other books Lockhart had written, "Gadding with Ghouls" and "Wandering with Werewolves" proving to be the most popular. And most of the teachers - except of course, Snape - were finding that they were talking more about Lockhart than they were about the subject they were teaching, being bombarded with numerous questions from lovesick witches of all ages.

However, there was one witch who didn't subscribe to the Gilderoy Lockhart fan club. Luna shook her head when Ginny tried to pass on a copy she had borrowed of Wandering with Werewolves. "Daddy said he's talking poppycock."

Ginny thought this rather rich coming from someone in Luna's family, particularly someone who hunted creatures that didn't exist. She again tried to pass the book to Luna. "Just read this, and you'll see you're wrong."

Luna shook her head. "I trust Daddy, so I'm not going to waste my time."

Bolstered by Luna's rejection of Lockhart's feats, Harry mentioned his own doubts. "I did wonder how one person could do all that."

"Daddy wrote about him in his letter." Luna fished it out of her bag and held it out. "Read it."

Harry was reluctant to take the letter. "It's private, Luna."

"Go on." Luna shoved the letter towards Harry. "I want you to read it."

Harry unwillingly took the letter, and he began to read what Xenophilius had written. By the time he had finished reading, he was frowning. "He said that he was there when a man named Emin Vartanian defeated the Wagga Wagga Werewolf, and that it wasn't Lockhart at all. But when Luna's Dad questioned Emin the next day for the Quibbler, the man denied any knowledge of it."

"That's because he didn't do it," Ginny said impatiently. "Gilderoy Lockhart did. This Emin person probably wanted to get some publicity, and he got worried when he realized he would be interviewed."

Luna repeated what had been in her letter. "Daddy swears Emin defeated the Werewolf after using the Homorphus charm."

"He was obviously wrong." Ginny waved the book around. "It was Gilderoy Lockhart who used the Homorphus charm on the werewolf. It's all in here."

"I believe what Daddy said..." Luna ignored Ginny's pushing the book towards her yet again, "...and I think Lockhart stole the idea from that man."

"Harry, you've read the book." Ginny turned to Harry for support. "Tell her."

Having met Luna's father, Harry would have said that he was strange, but most definitely not a liar. "Sorry, Ginny. I'm on Luna's side."

Ginny scowled. "You'll both see how wrong you are when Gilderoy Lockhart starts teaching next year." After scooping up the book, she promptly stomped off.

Luna smiled at Harry. "Thank you for believing me."

"Something didn't feel right when I was reading the book, and what your dad said made me believe you." Harry pulled out his own copy

of Wandering with Werewolves. "And it means that this book is probably a load of rubbish."

"Daddy said they all are." Luna replaced her letter in her bag. "What will you do with the book?"

"I don't know." Harry shoved the book back into his bag. "But I'm not wasting my time reading this one or any of the others."

Luna stared at Harry. "Others?"

"I actually bought all of the books," a red faced Harry admitted, as Luna stifled a giggle. "But I suppose I can always burn them."

Harry didn't burn them, but he did bury them deep in his trunk, swearing he would never read them again. He had no idea that they would become the reading material for his third year classes.

Harry sat down next to a green-faced Ron. "You're going to do just fine."

"I'm going to look stupid," Ron lamented. "I'm going to be crap. I should never have agreed to this."

"But you can do it," Neville protested, and he reminded Ron about his own abilities. "Look at how well you flew when you stayed at my house."

"I was just flying for fun then," Ron wailed, Neville's words not quite having the same effect that Harry's had had on the Hogwarts Express. "Let me back out."

Seamus waved his fork in the air, as he too joined in with trying to persuade Ron to continue. "No-one will laugh at you. At least you're having a go."

George also tried to encourage his brother. "He's right, Ron. Look at who else is going up for this. McGraw is the size of a house, Bond is all fingers and thumbs, and..."

Fred butted in when George took a breather for air, "...and Jardin wouldn't know the brush from the handle on a broomstick if it was pointed out to him."

Ron let the twins' words sink in, before responding in a still despondent voice. "This will make it all the worse for me when I mess up."

"You won't mess up, Ron." Surprisingly Hermione backed up the twins. "And if you think you're going to, just pretend that no-one else is there, or that they're all naked."

Ron had never heard of the Muggle way of trying to relax someone before. "Naked?"

"It will certainly distract you." Fred gave a guffaw. "Especially if you think of someone like Snape."

Ron gagged. "I'm going to need to scrub my brains out now!"

But Hermione and Fred's combined ploy had worked, and the discussion on the Gryffindor table devolved into a plethora of derogatory remarks about who would be the most disgusting person they could think of without clothes; Snape won hands down.

And when it was time to head out to the quidditch pitch, Ron's nerves did return a little, but on spotting Snape as he went by and remembering Fred's words, he was hard pushed to hold onto his nerves, his main urge now being to laugh but knowing better than to give into the temptation. And once he reached the quidditch pitch, Ron tried his best to ignore everyone and concentrate on what Oliver Wood, the captain of the quidditch team, was saying.

Soon Oliver had finished his short but impassioned speech, and he began to survey everyone who had turned up, giving instructions to each of them until he reached Ron. "You're here for the seeker's position?"

"Yeah." Ron tried to keep his voice steady.

"Would you mind also trying out for goalkeeper?" Oliver asked. "I need a reserve, and you and McClaggen are both the same size, so I want you both to try out."

When Wood walked off, Ron glanced over at the boy who was in the year above him, and tried to be polite. "Alright?"

"I will be when I make reserve goalkeeper." McClaggan's voice was full of determination, and not a little cockiness.

Feeling intimidated, Ron fell silent, taking up the Nimbus 2000, which Harry had loaned him, when told to by Oliver and heading out to the pitch. The three boys George had mentioned were already floating in the air: Bond and Jardim both looking as though they might fall off at any moment, and McGraw's bowing broom giving the impression that it was going to break and send its rider plummeting to the ground. Upon seeing this, Ron's confidence began to return, and it was given a further boost by Harry, who was sitting in the stands with Justin, yelling out loudly, "You can do it, Ron."

Ron gave Harry a thumbs up, and, gritting his teeth, he readied himself for the challenge ahead. By the end of the test, when Ron landed and handed over the snitches he had caught, he discovered that he had easily got more snitches than anyone else, and his face split into a happy grin. "I did it, I actually did it."

Neville came running over. "Ron, you were brilliant."

Oliver wouldn't have said that, all four possibilities for the seeker's position having taken over an hour to catch the nine snitches he had released. But due to a serious lack of seeking talent, Oliver didn't have much choice, and so he held out his hand. "Ron, the seeker's position is yours. You can go and get showered now."

"So I don't need to try out for reserve goalkeeper?" Ron asked.

"No." Oliver had already put McClaggan up against some of the chasers while Ron was pursuing the snitches. "McClaggan is going to be reserve."

Ron was delighted. McClaggan was only a reserve, and he, Ron, had made the actual quidditch team. His brothers clapped him on the back and made an offer Ron was not going to refuse, just before Harry came over and congratulated Ron. "Well done."

"Thanks, Harry." Ron's happiness was evident; his smile was the brightest Harry had ever seen. "That was amazing."

Like Oliver Wood, Harry was unable to agree with his friend. So, remembering what Hermione had said to him after his own quidditch trials, Harry met Ron's eyes, and deftly side-stepped any possible minefields by avoiding commenting on Ron's skills. "You looked as though you were enjoying yourself."

"It was fun." Ron turned as he heard his name being called, and he passed back Harry's broomstick. "Thanks for the loan of this. Look, I've got to go. Fred and George are going to be holding some sort of party to celebrate the new team."

"See you later then." Harry turned to Justin while Ron and the rest of the Gryffindor team walked off. "What did you think?"

Not wanting to be horrible about Ron, Justin looked anywhere but at Harry and told a white lie. "He did pretty well."

"You're lying, Justin." Harry grinned, and then he explained how he knew that. "You've gone red, you won't look at me, and you're fidgeting."

Justin absorbed this information, and he turned his previous comment into a direct question to see how Harry reacted. "So you don't think he did pretty well?"

"No, I don't, Justin," Harry answered truthfully. "I think Gryffindor is going to get slaughtered this year."

"Yeah, they are," Justin agreed, finally voicing his opinion now that Harry had been so honest. "Ron was just the best of a bad bunch."

Harry sighed. "The whole game relies on the seeker, and if Ron doesn't get better, everyone is going to beat them. We are, Ravenclaw with that Cho girl will, and so will Slytherin."

"Who's their seeker now that Higgs has left?" Justin hadn't heard yet.

"I don't know." Harry had tried to find out but his discreet inquiries had gone unanswered. "But at least we're going to have a strong team this year. You never know, we might even win the Quidditch Cup."

"I'm not banking on it." Justin didn't want to get his hopes up. "Come on, I've got some sweets and chocolate Mum sent me in my room. We can grab some, and then work on our Potions essay."

Although Potions was a lot more pleasant now that Molly was teaching the class, Harry still pulled a face, but the thought of chocolate helped to ease his pain, and the two boys headed back in to Hufflepuff.

As Harry had predicted, Slytherin slaughtered Gryffindor in the first match of the season. And both Harry and Justin had been surprised to discover that a girl, Helena Cory, had taken over as seeker. But in truth she was almost as bad as Ron, and it had only been the sheer volume of foul plays and Cory being lucky enough to be right beside the snitch when it had appeared for the tenth time that had led to Slytherin's win.

Harry's first outing of the season, however, went much better. Remembering last year's game, Harry changed his playing tactics. This time he didn't go straight for the snitch. Being a little more seasoned, Harry instead used his body to obstruct Cho Chang, the pretty Asian girl whose name he hadn't known previously. Using this method, Harry was able to hold Chang at bay for almost twenty minutes, blocking several attempts she made to access the snitch, until it disappeared into the distance each time.

Harry's ploy worked to Hufflepuff's advantage, and the team, with Cedric Diggory playing in his new position, racked up over 200 points before Harry swooped in and took the snitch, using the roll technique he had introduced Ginny to, in order to fool Chang as he had swept beside her, reaching out with his left hand to grab the snitch. This put Hufflepuff ahead of Slytherin, something that had not happened for over forty years. But it was something that made Harry even less popular with Severus Snape, who promptly placed Harry in detention a few days later.

Harry's back hurt and his fingers were bleeding by the time he had finished scrubbing the desks and walls in the Defense classroom. "I've finished, Professor. Is there anything else?"

Severus met Harry's familiar green eyes, and they were so like Lily's that Severus' heart felt as if it had almost stopped beating. Severus had intended to make Harry scrub the floor as well but he suddenly

discovered that he didn't want to be in the same room as the boy, and he snarled at him, "No, get out."

Harry fled gratefully, leaving his Defense teacher behind.

After he had left, Severus opened his desk drawer and fingered the diary that still resided in there. Severus had had a chance to plant the diary on Harry while Harry was cleaning, but just as they had at the start of term, thoughts of Harry's mother had stopped him from effectively ending Harry's life; something that would have made Severus very happy.

He hated the dark-haired boy who looked so much like James Potter that it was like a knife in Severus' side every time his eyes rested on Harry's wayward hair. But whenever Harry looked up, his features unmarred by glasses, his bright green eyes would pierce Severus in a totally different way. And remembering how Harry's eyes had met his just moments earlier, Severus found himself thinking about Lily's eyes again, and he half-wished he hadn't handed out a detention to Harry, thereby opening himself to the torment that came any time he thought about the woman who had borne the boy.

Severus thought back to the trigger that had caused him to decide to punish Potter. He had been at the quidditch game a few days earlier when Harry had taken the snitch against Ravenclaw. As the entire Hufflepuff team had been flying a victory lap, Severus had been unable to help but notice how much like James Potter the boy actually was. Potter had always showed off after winning just like his son was doing now, and Severus had been filled with a hatred he could barely contain.

He had had to fight not to pull out his wand when Harry had gotten closer to the teachers' box, the snitch held aloft in his hand. His fingers had been closing around the slim piece of wood when Severus had locked eyes with Harry for a fraction of a second, and it had been hard to miss how bright and filled with joy Harry's eyes had been. At that moment in time, Harry had looked more like his mother than he had ever done before, and it had reminded Severus of how Lily had looked when she had first told him about her acceptance to Hogwarts. And Severus hated Harry all the more for reminding him of it.

Severus growled angrily. "I don't want to think about her."

"Who, Severus?" Minerva's voice drifted into the classroom.

"No-one." Severus closed the desk drawer. "What can I do for you?"

"It's about all the detentions you're assigning Harry." Minerva said brusquely. "It has to stop, Severus."

"He's a useless, good for nothing, little brat." Severus didn't bother to hide his feelings about Harry.

"I'm sure you feel the same way about Neville Longbottom, but I don't see you assigning him detentions every other day." Minerva was not stupid; she knew exactly how Severus viewed most of the students. "And I'm quite certain there are plenty of other students who you also find irritating."

"I don't have time to monitor all of them." Severus made an excuse. "And Potter is easily the laziest student at this school."

"I think differently." Minerva had reviewed all of Harry's current papers in Defense before going to speak to Severus. "And I've also appraised Harry's work so far this year, and I am well aware that you are downgrading his work."

Severus resisted the angry urge to pull his wand on Minerva. "So what do you suggest?"

"Harry will attend your classes with his classmates but I will be assessing his written assignments." Minerva's voice was resolute, leaving Severus in no doubt that this new arrangement was non-negotiable. "And during class time you will answer any questions he might have and instruct him as usual but unless he does something that truly warrants a detention, you will leave Harry alone. Is this understood?"

"Yes," Severus ground out, having little choice but to acquiesce. "Is that all, Headmistress?"

"It is," Minerva said, but she didn't leave straightaway. Her face was full of concern as she faced Severus. "Severus, don't let your hatred for someone who is long dead cloud your judgment. You're only hurting yourself in the long run."

"I'll bear that in mind." Forcing his anger, which had surged up again, deep down inside of him, Severus turned away, waiting for the Headmistress to leave.

Realizing that her words had had no impact, Minerva sadly shook her head. "Just try, Severus, for both of your sakes."

This time Severus didn't respond to the Headmistress, and after the door had closed, Severus opened his desk drawer again and changed his mind about his intended target for the diary. "Next time, Potter, there will be no reprieve, Lily be damned." He then grabbed the diary, shoved it inside his cloak, and walked out of the classroom.

Next Chapter: Severus is thwarted in his attempts; Luna runs into trouble; Draco falls foul of George Weasley yet again.

Chapter 24: Galloping Goit Spackle

September turned into October, and October into November. Lockhart mania died down, and the school returned to a normal rhythm. When Christmas arrived, Harry spent another wonderful Christmas with the Weasleys, but with Remus out of the country, their planned get together had to wait. And so the New Year came and went without any major upsets, and without Severus achieving his goal.

Therefore, still not having succeeded by the time Easter arrived, Severus was beyond frustrated. Every opportunity to plant the diary on Harry had failed. Severus had therefore decided to return home for a few days during the holiday weekend - he wanted to converse with the diary, but he didn't want to risk doing so within the hallowed confines of Hogwarts. However, as Severus sat at his battered oak desk in the room that served as both a library and a study, he found himself more than a little nervous. But aware that he couldn't put off informing the diary's occupant of his failure for very much longer, Severus took a deep breath, opened the diary up, and wrote in it: 'Time is running out. Easter is upon us and I have been unable to deposit the diary on Potter without suspicion.'

'What has gone wrong?' the diary's occupant asked.

Severus, of course, didn't mention that during the course of the year, he had had several chances to deposit the diary on Harry, but initially his guilt about Lily had stopped him. Instead, he cited that circumstances had changed enough to prevent him from carrying out his deed. 'McGonagall decided I was being too hard on the boy, and thus prevented me from placing him in detention where I might have had an opportunity to place the diary upon him.'

'In that case, we will wait for the new school year to try again.' The words came back after a short time, before they faded and more took their place. 'And I expect you to come up with a way to try and place the diary on the boy at the start of the year - after what you've told me about our indirectly shared history, Potter is still my number one choice. But should you not succeed then we should rethink our strategy about depositing the diary on the boy and find an alternate victim. Tell me, Severus, do you have any suggestions as to who would make almost as good a sacrifice as Potter?'

Severus thought for a few minutes before responding, thinking about the victim he had initially decided upon at the start of the year. 'There are several suitable alternative candidates I can think of, one in particular. But before I try and place the diary upon any of them next year, perhaps you could offer your opinion as to whom you would prefer.'

The man and the diary's occupant then exchanged a good deal of information, before Severus closed the diary and placed it in his safe. As instructed, it would be the start of the new school year before he took it out again.

Hermione wandered disconsolately along the corridor. Despite being aware that she should be setting her sights elsewhere, Hermione could not get over her crush on George Weasley, and she had just discovered that he was taking Katie Bell into Hogsmeade that Sunday. Wrapped up in her misery, she barely noticed where she was going, and before she knew what had happened, she had almost walked into Draco Malfoy and his two goons, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle.

Normally Hermione would have turned away, but this time she was unable to. For up against the wall, with tears streaming down her cheeks, and her book bag at her feet, was Luna Lovegood. Hermione had the feeling that she wouldn't have time to fetch a teacher before the Slytherins finished whatever they were intending to do, and so she instead opted for the offensive approach. "What do you think you are you doing to her?"

"Having a little fun." Draco smirked at his fellow Gryffindors. "Weren't we, boys?"

Hermione realized that her first instinct had been right, and she bravely made a demand. "Let her go."

"This has nothing to do with you, Granger," Draco drawled, turning his back on Hermione. "It's her we have the problem with, so get lost."

Hermione didn't budge. "Let her go. I bet she's done nothing to you."

"She sent me this." Draco spun around and threw a magazine at Hermione.

Hermione caught it, stopping it from hitting her in the face. After examining what he had thrown at her, Hermione looked at Draco with scorn. "You're picking on her because she sent you a copy of the Quibbler?"

"She also sent me a note saying that I might find the piece on galloping goit spackle of interest," Draco snarled.

Luna finally said something. "I saw the spots on his face, and they looked a lot like galloping goit spackle to me, so I thought I'd send him something to read that might help."

"Luna, I don't think there's any such thing as galloping goit spackle. Don't you mean spattergroit?" Hermione remembered Ron being asked if he had it by one of the Castle portraits, but the portrait had been referring to Ron's freckles and not the normal teenage pimples that Draco had begun to develop.

"But there is," Luna responded in a convincing voice. "And Malfoy definitely looks as though he has it."

"I haven't got goit spackle, Loony." Draco glared at the other two Slytherins, who were stifling their snorts of laughter. "As that know-it-all has just pointed out, it doesn't exist, and if it did, I still wouldn't have it. Stupid freak!"

"She was just trying to help, Malfoy. Now if you don't let her go, I will fetch a teacher," Hermione threatened.

"If you want her, then please, take her," Malfoy offered in an uncharacteristically nice voice.

Now a little unnerved, but not wanting to be seen as antagonistic by drawing her wand, Hermione left it up her sleeve. Instead, she glared at both Greg and Vincent, and then beckoned to the blonde girl. "Luna, come here."

At Hermione's angry stare, both Greg and Vincent stepped aside and let the blonde girl move. Draco had already said that Hermione could take Luna, and so they weren't going to interfere.

Draco, however, had other plans, and the moment Hermione touched Luna's arm, he withdrew his wand, aiming it at both girls. "Densaugeo."

Despite her apprehension, Hermione had not really expected Draco to attack her. She therefore knew that she wasn't going to be able to draw her wand in time to defend herself. Doing the only thing she could, she swung Luna out of reach of the spell that leapt from Draco's wand, and she took the brunt of it instead. At first, Hermione thought that nothing had happened and that the spell had failed, and then she felt her teeth engorging.

Luna gave a gasp of horror, "Your teeth!"

"I cwm fweel wem." Hermione's words were totally distorted, and she slapped a hand to her mouth but it did little to cover her still growing dentures. "Swop it, Malfwoy, swop it!"

Draco laughed nastily. "Serves you right for interfering. Next time keep your nose out of things that don't concern you, Granger." He and his friends then sauntered off.

Luna took Hermione's arm. "I don't know how to stop it. We'd better go and see Madam Pomfrey."

Hermione's front teeth had almost reached her feet when she stepped through the door of the hospital wing and she was beginning to panic. Luna called out, "Madam Pomfrey?"

Pomona came bustling out, and she took one look at Hermione, before shaking her head. "Student pranks will be the death of me." She then aimed her wand at Hermione. "Arresto Auctus."

Hermione's teeth immediately stopped growing but they still remained almost as tall as she was. She looked hopelessly at Madam Pomfrey, who still hadn't quite finished, and she passed Hermione a mirror. "When they reach their normal size, hold up your hand." She then recited the necessary spell. "Densredactus."

Hermione watched in the mirror as her teeth began to shrink. But just before they reached their normal proportions, she was hit with a great idea, and she waited until the very last moment to hold up her

hand. When she did, Madam Pomfrey cancelled the spell. "Do they look the right size now?"

"They look just perfect." Hermione didn't want to lie to the nurse but she didn't want her original oversized teeth back either.

"I don't suppose you want to tell me who did this to you?" Poppy asked.

Hermione didn't want Draco going after Luna again, and she therefore shook her head. "Not really."

"Off you go then," Poppy said in dismissal.

Luna followed Hermione out of the wing. "Thanks for sticking up for me."

"Luna, you should try and avoid Malfoy and the other Slytherins," Hermione warned, marching towards the library. "I know you mean well but you've seen how that turned out."

"But I really thought he had..." Luna's recitation was cut off by an exasperated Hermione.

"Malfoy was right about one thing. Gackle spoit, or whatever you called it, doesn't exist, Luna," Hermione snapped, her mouth still a little sore from where the oversized teeth had rubbed against it. "You need to take your head out of the clouds and join the rest of us in the real world."

Luna's face fell immediately, and tears began to form. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to get hurt."

The young girl's distress meant that Hermione was hit with a healthy dose of guilt. "I'm sorry I shouted at you but Malfoy is a nasty piece of work. In future, I suggest you stick to helping your friends in Ravenclaw, instead of trying to help people like him."

"I don't have any friends..." Luna blurted out, the tears beginning to spill down her cheeks, "...not in Ravenclaw, anyway."

Even though she knew she wasn't exactly popular in her own house, Hermione was at least friends with Ron and Neville, as well as the twins. "You must have one friend in Ravenclaw."

Luna shook her head. "I don't. The girls in my dorm call me 'Loony' - not to my face like Malfoy did - but I've heard them. I've also heard them say that they don't want to sleep in the same room as me, in case being weird is catching."

Hermione had gone through something similar at junior school. However, she at least, had had the sanctuary of being able to go home at the end of the day. Hermione was curious, however, as to what had caused Luna's roommates to reject her. "Were they horrible when you first moved into the dormitory?"

"No." Luna slumped into the niche at the back of the stacks in the library. "And I've tried talking to them, but they make excuses or just walk off."

"What do you talk to them about?" Hermione asked, starting to suspect that the topic of conversation might be the cause of Luna's problems.

Luna began a recitation on the various creatures she believed in, the Quibbler, Ginny, and Harry. "Actually the only time they bother to listen to me is when I talk about Ginny and Harry."

Hermione was hardly surprised that the girls avoided Luna if she was talking about the strange creatures she generally did. "Luna, most people like to talk about normal things, such as friends, schoolwork, or even the weather. Perhaps you should try to talk about these sorts of things and not goit spackle or fizziwigs."

"I don't understand." Luna was completely confused. "I thought that goit spackle and fizziwigs were normal things. Lots of people have goit spackle, and if you listen, you can hear fizziwigs all the time."

Hermione had decided not to ask what fizziwigs were when Luna had listed them a few moments earlier, and she stuck to that decision now. "Luna, most people have never heard of goit spackle and probably don't want to talk about it." Hermione herself certainly didn't. "You should talk about things that other people can understand, such as how much you don't like something, food, or

what's happening in school, and lay off the talk about creatures no-one else has never heard of."

"But I like to talk about them," Luna said in her defense. "And Daddy said that I should talk about the things I like."

Hermione took Luna's hand upon seeing that the girl was getting even more upset. "Luna, I know you love to talk about these things, but it's just making other people, like Malfoy and the girls in your bedroom, see you differently."

"Loony, you mean?" Luna's voice was a little bitter, and she stifled a sniffle.

"I'm sorry but yes," Hermione said with regret. "Luna, if you want friends in Ravenclaw, then you're going to have to change what you talk about."

Luna met Hermione's eyes. "Would you change if it was you?"

Hermione hesitated and considered lying, but her parents had brought her up to be a truthful girl, and she therefore answered honestly. "No, but that's me."

"Then I'm not going to either," Luna said in a determined voice.

"Then will you at least stop sending things to people like Malfoy?" Hermione pleaded. "I may not be around to save you next time, and I don't want you to get hurt."

Luna really did only consider Harry and Ginny to be her friends but Hermione's words were beginning to make her wonder if she had one more friend she could count on. "You really care what happens to me, don't you?"

Hermione hadn't thought about it before, but seeing the hopeful look on the younger girl's face, she nodded. "Of course I do."

Luna's hopeful look didn't fade with her next question. "So does this mean that you're my friend?"

Again, Hermione had never thought about it, but she didn't want to hurt the girl's feelings and say no. Rather than lying, she didn't give a straight answer. "Friends look after friends, don't they?"

It turned out that it was the right to say, for Luna beamed, and she told Hermione, "This means that I've got three friends now: You, Harry, and Ginny. And because you're my friend, I can talk about what I like with you, can't I?"

"That's what friends are for." Hermione gave up as far as 'normal' was concerned, but she was still determined to help Luna connect with her roommates. "Luna, I'm not going to ask you to change for me but you still might want to get some practice in talking about some..." Hermione searched for a word to sum up 'normal' but failing to do so, came up with something else instead, "...different things with me. It will help you get along better with the girls in Ravenclaw."

Luna was grateful for any help that Hermione might be able to offer. "What do you want to talk about?"

"How about our families?" Hermione suggested.

Luna was always happy to talk about her father, and the two girls talked quietly in the niche for a little while until Luna regretfully stood up. "I have some Charms homework I need to finish but I enjoyed our talk."

Hermione stood up as well. "So did I, Luna," She placed a hand on the girl's arm and tried to make her point about 'normal' again. "And I know you don't want to change what you talk about but the way you've just talked to me is how you should be talking to the girls in your dorm."

"That's 'normal' things?" Luna checked.

"Yes." Hermione was encouraged that Luna had finally caught on. "And you can always ask me if you're not sure."

"Okay, I will." Luna grabbed her book bag and checked the time. "And I'd like to talk normally some more but I really need to do my homework."

"Do you need help?" Hermione asked, feeling a little buoyed that she had finally gotten through to the girl.

Luna, however, proved that she still hadn't quite grasped the concept of 'normal' with her next comment. "No, thank you. My head isn't full of Wrackspurts right now, so my brain is working okay."

It occurred then to Hermione that she was never going to get Luna to be like everyone else, and that perhaps she should just give it up. With Luna following her to a table, Hermione sat down. "I have my own Charms homework to do, so we can work together."

"I'd like that." Luna opened up her bag and took out her homework, before happily settling down to get on with the problems she had been assigned.

The girls had barely started though when they were interrupted. When a shadow fell over the table, Hermione looked up, and she smiled when she saw who it was. "George, what are you doing here? I thought you were going into Hogsmeade."

"I was going to but I changed my mind." George hefted his book bag onto the seat beside him. "I've been looking for you. I have an Arithmancy problem I thought you might like to take a look at, if I'm not interrupting."

Hermione immediately ditched the homework she had begun. "You're not." When George looked at her in surprise, she suddenly realized that George had meant interrupting because of Luna and not because of her Charms homework, and she quickly clarified what she had meant. "Luna and I were doing some Charms homework, but mine can wait."

"I've got some Charms homework too." George pulled it out. "So I think we should all get that done, and then we can all look at the Arithmancy problem together."

Realizing that George had included her in his comment, Luna smiled a little shyly at the older boy, before settling back down to her work. She never usually felt so comfortable, but sitting across from George and Hermione, she experienced a moment of belonging, something that only ever happened whenever she was with her father or Harry.

After a few minutes, she proffered up some information. "I want to study Arithmancy when I'm a third year. Mummy used it a lot when she was creating new spells."

George's ears pricked up at the mention of new spells. "Your mum was a spell developer?"

Luna was delighted that George seemed interested. "Yes, she invented the Fata Advertus spell, which attracts fairies."

George had never heard of such a spell before, but he decided that he might have a use for it. "Do you know how to cast the spell?"

"Yes, I can show you, if you want me to." Luna began to tug out her wand from her hair. "And I know more than that one, if you want to see those as well."

"Not right now." George didn't think that Irma Pince would be too happy if fairies began to appear in the library. "But perhaps we can talk about it after we've finished doing our homework."

"Does this mean that you're my friend now?" Luna hoped so, for it would mean that she would have four friends, instead of three, which would be two more than she had started the day with.

George would have let her call him anything she liked as long as she shared the spells she was privy to. "You're my friend."

"Goodie." Luna re-secured her wand and buried her head back in her charms book.

George too dipped his head down, and he began his own homework but part of his brain was already figuring out for what he could use the newly discovered spell.

After finishing their homework and discussing the Arithmancy question - Luna struggling a little to understand it, but Hermione easily deducing the answer - the trio went outside. Once there, Luna showed George the fairy spell, and George gave her a spontaneous hug for doing so. Wanting to drop off her book bag before dinner, Luna, beaming from ear to ear, skipped off back towards Ravenclaw.

A little jealous of the attention that George had shown Luna, Hermione took him to task while they walked back to Gryffindor. "You shouldn't encourage her to do that, George."

"It's just a harmless spell, Hermione," George answered, as he took from Hermione one of the large books that she was toting.

Hermione's jealousy over Luna disappeared at the gallant gesture, but Hermione still felt that she had to explain to George about Luna. "George, up until today Luna had only two real friends: your sister and Harry."

George quickly cottoned onto what Hermione was hinting at. "So you're saying that I shouldn't be friends with her?"

"No!" Hermione didn't want George withdrawing his friendship from Luna. "But she's having a terrible time in Ravenclaw, and really, ever since her mum died during that experiment, Luna has only had her dad to rely on."

"I thought Luna's mum died in an explosion." George could still remember his mum telling them about what had happened, but to be truthful he hadn't really been listening that closely.

"She did," Hermione confirmed. "Luna said it happened when her mum was trying to invent a new spell that involved making some sort of new potion, and the two didn't go well together."

"Luna's mum made potions as well as inventing spells?" George excitedly asked, entirely missing the point Hermione was trying to make.

"George, you should forget about the spells and potions!" Hermione glared at him. "Luna's already has to put up with enough without you pretending to be her friend just to get some stupid spell off her."

"I'm not pretending. I like her," George answered honestly. "She might be a little weird but I don't care, so I was telling the truth when I told her that she was my friend."

"I'm sorry for accusing you of not being her friend," Hermione immediately apologized. "But I don't want Luna trying to impress you and maybe hurting herself for the sake of a stupid spell."

"Don't worry..." George took a second book that Hermione was struggling with, "...I won't do anything that will get her hurt."

Hermione had to settle for George's reassurance. "Thank you, and thanks for carrying those books."

"I wish Pince would let us shrink them. It would make carting them around a lot easier." George shifted them to his other arm.

"You can't shrink old library books, they might disintegrate," Hermione said in a horrified voice before she gave George an impish smile. "And who needs to shrink things when I have someone like you to carry them for me?"

George was about to respond when he realized something. Hermione looked different but he couldn't think why. Hermione stopped before George could say anything. "We're here."

Any opportunity was then lost for George, Hermione taking the books from him and thanking him again, before heading off to the girls' wing of Gryffindor.

George was sat on his bed, lost in thought, when he became aware that someone was calling him. "What?"

"Why didn't you really come into Hogsmeade with us?" Fred asked now that he had gotten his brother's attention. "It was the last chance before the end of the term to stock up on stuff."

"I had homework to do, and Mum said she'd ground me for two weeks if I didn't get it finished." George nodded towards the pile of parchment that sat on his side table. "And besides, I knew you would get me what I wanted."

"I did," Fred confirmed, before going on. "But Katie was really disappointed when you decided not to go; she really likes you, George."

George shrugged. "I like her but I'm not sure I like her enough to be her boyfriend."

"Do you still like Hermione Granger?" Fred was aware that George had had a bit of a thing for the younger Gryffindor.

George knew where this was going. "I do like her but not like that."

"I'm glad to hear it. It's not as if she's particularly attractive." Fred could see from his brother's darkening face that this particular comment had not gone down well.

"Fred!" George snapped, fed up with his twin's sometimes rather nasty remarks about other people. "How many times do I have to tell you that I don't care what someone looks like? It's as Mum always says, it's what inside that counts."

"If you say so." Fred was shallower than his twin, and he much preferred looks over substance. "But be honest. She isn't exactly someone you dream of kissing. I mean those teeth..."

"Her teeth... of course, her teeth!"

Fred was now confused. "What are you going on about?"

"I knew something was different with her this afternoon..." George began, only to be interrupted by Fred.

"Ha! Ha!" Fred had a knowing look on his face. "That's why you didn't want to go to Hogsmeade. You spent the entire afternoon studying with her, didn't you?" Fred's tone implied that George had been doing slightly more than studying. "Which means that you're lying about not fancying her anymore."

"Fred, I'm not about lying about fancying her. But yes, I'll admit that I spent the entire afternoon with both her and Luna Lovegood, and we were actually studying, something I'm sure you don't know much about." At this point Fred stuck out his tongue at his twin, which George ignored. "But that's not the point I'm making." George now had the smile of someone who had finally managed to figure out a complicated puzzle. "Hermione looked different but I couldn't figure out what it was until you mentioned her looks."

Fred was still none the wiser. "So?"

George filled him in on his convoluted line of thought. "She looked different because her teeth are small."

Fred snorted. "There are rabbits with smaller teeth than her."

George got to his feet. "Two sickles you're wrong."

"Done." Fred held out his hand.

George shook it. "You'll see tomorrow."

"Sure I will." Fred was convinced that despite his denials, George still liked Hermione, and was subsequently viewing her through rose-colored glasses. "And I'll be laughing all the way to the bank."

"Tomorrow, Fred." George picked up his shower kit. "Just make sure you have my two sickles ready."

The next morning Hermione was sitting at breakfast when she became aware that she was being stared at. "Ron, why is Fred staring at me?"

Ron glanced over to where his brothers were sitting. "How do you know it's Fred?"

"He's wearing a tie, George rarely does," Hermione remarked. "But that doesn't answer my question."

"I dunno." Ron glanced at a craning Fred again. "Perhaps he fancies you."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Hermione turned back around to look once more but Fred had stopped staring.

"So?" George asked his brother as he sat back down.

"You're right!" Fred was flabbergasted. "Her teeth are normal sized."

George promptly held out his hand. "Pay up!"

Fred begrudgingly handed over the two sickles. "How do you suppose she did it?"

"Spell, I suppose," George guessed. "I really don't know but I'm sure I'll eventually find out."

He didn't have to wait long. Heading along the corridor to attend Arithmancy, he overheard Draco crowing about enlarging Hermione's teeth for defending Luna. George's hand went to his wand, but he hesitated, and instead he smiled to himself. "Revenge is a dish best served cold, stone cold."

Draco Malfoy sauntered happily along the corridor. Despite Harry's and the Hufflepuff quidditch team's valiant efforts, Slytherin had won both the quidditch and house cups again, although the quidditch cup had been a close call, with only twenty points separating Slytherin and Hufflepuff. Draco turned to say something to Greg, only to realize that his friends were no longer at his side, and Draco called out behind him, "Come along, Greg. I thought you would be more excited about getting some breakfast."

Draco's answer was twin screams, and he turned around in annoyance. "What the hell!"

"I'm a girl." Greg was almost crying.

"You're in girls' clothing," Draco corrected. "You are not a girl."

Vincent was in the same predicament. Both boys were sporting skirts and Mary Janes. "Who did this to us?"

Draco looked up and down the corridor but could see no-one. "I don't know. Just go back and change. I'll see you in the Great Hall."

"Um, Draco, you might want to get changed as well," Greg suggested.

Draco dashed into the boys' bathroom that they had just passed, and he looked in the mirror. He was horrified to see his hair had been separated into two ponytails, each one held up by a bright yellow ribbon, and he was also wearing a skirt. "I'm going to kill whoever did this." He promptly ripped out the ribbons, only for two more to take their place.

"Let's get back to the dorm," Vincent suggested. "Before anyone sees us."

However, before they reached the dormitory, a plethora of fairies suddenly appeared and began floating around their heads. Draco kept trying to swat them and hit them with spells but they were too quick for him. He therefore began running to try and escape them. The fairies, however, followed.

"If I find out who did this..." Draco grumbled as he ran until he reached the safe confines of Slytherin. His only consolation was the relief that no-one had passed him and the other two boys on their way back. But his relief was short-lived when Draco realized that because it was rather early in the morning, most of the Slytherins were still just getting up or about to leave for breakfast, meaning that there were more students than usual in the common room. Silence fell when the occupants saw the state of the three boys. However, the silence quickly turned to laughter.

Embarrassed, Draco fled to his bedroom to find his roommate was just getting back from taking a shower.

Blaise's mouth fell open at the sight of the three boys in girls' clothing. "Is there something you're not telling us, Draco?"

"Fuck you!" Draco snarled. "Did you do this?"

"Of course I didn't." Blaise denied having anything to do with the prank, although he wished he had. "If I had, I've have gone the whole hog and turned you into a proper girl."

"Hey, Malfoy," one of the older students called out, after poking her head around the door, "do you want to lend me your skirt and fairies?"

Draco slammed shut the door to the bedroom, narrowly missing hitting the girl's departing head. "We need to get these clothes off, and get rid of these stupid fairies."

"There's a slight problem." Vincent was tugging desperately at the skirt zipper. "It won't come undone."

Draco tried his own skirt, to discover exactly the same. "I am really going to kill whoever did this."

Blaise sat on the edge of his bed chortling. "It kind of suits you."

Flipping Blaise off, Draco tried using a severing spell. When that failed, he hunted through every single drawer in the room until he found a pair of scissors in his desk. Finally managing to cut through the skirt, the hated garment fell to the floor. Draco also cut through the thin strap holding the Mary Janes on his feet. However, no matter how hard he tried, his hair remained in bunches and he was unable to banish the fairies, which seemed to be centered solely on him. "I can't go out looking like this."

Vincent and Greg had both returned from their room, and they were both now redressed in trousers and boots, having cut off their skirts and shoes. Having short hair, they had escaped the ribbons, and for some unknown reason the fairies were ignoring them, so they both now looked normal. "We're off to breakfast."

"Is food all you can think about?" Draco screamed at his friends. "What about me?"

"I'm starving, Draco." Greg was loyal to Draco but his loyalty to his stomach came first. "We'll see you later."

"I'm with you two." Blaise had no wish to stay in a room with the girlish Draco, and, still grinning, he followed the two bigger boys out.

Draco headed into the bathroom, trying every spell he knew to lift the hex that someone had put on him. It was all to no avail. After twenty minutes his hair was still tied up, but thankfully the fairies had gotten fed up with flying around his head and they had all vanished.

"So who have you pissed off this time, Draco?" Severus Snape's voice interrupted Draco's attempts.

"No-one, Uncle Severus." Draco really couldn't think of anyone, and it had been almost three months since he had attacked Luna and Hermione, so it never occurred to him that this might have something to do with them.

"You're sure?" Severus withdrew his wand.

"Absolutely." Draco's voice rang with truth.

"Very well." Severus aimed his wand at Draco. "Retrogradus Exemplus Capillus."

Draco reached up and found that the bunches had vanished. "Thank you, Uncle Severus."

"You haven't looked in the mirror yet," Severus warned him.

Draco did so, and gave a horrified scream. "My hair! Its turned red like those Weasels."

"I had to make it revert to its original condition." Severus didn't bother to hide his amusement at Draco's dismay. His godson sometimes irritated him beyond belief, and it was only the fact that he was Lucius' son that stopped Severus from handing out any serious punishment to the boy.

"But my hair's supposed blonde." Draco ran his fingers through his hair. "Not red."

"Your parents put a spell on it when you were a baby to turn it that color," Severus revealed. "As your godfather, I'm one of the few people who can alter it."

"So you can reapply the spell?" Draco looked hopefully at Severus.

"I'm afraid not." Severus could have but he decided to let Draco suffer for getting caught out in the first place, and he turned towards the door. "But your parents can return it to its usual condition when you return home."

"I can't be seen like this!" Draco's voice rose in a screech.

"Then I suggest you wear a hat to breakfast and on the Express." Severus was enjoying seeing the stuck-up boy panic.

"Please, Uncle Severus," Draco begged. "Please do something to help me."

Aware that Lucius would probably have something to say if he didn't help Draco out, Severus aimed his wand at Draco's head and cast the correct spell. "It won't be effective straightaway, and your hair

therefore might take a few hours to revert back to blonde." Severus stepped through the doorway. "Have a nice summer, Draco."

Draco was left fuming. He was hungry but there was no way he was ever going to leave Slytherin looking like this. Draco therefore had to stay in his bedroom, and he subsequently lost his chance to crow to Harry and his friends about Slytherin's wins as he had planned.

Luckily for Draco, his hair had once again reverted to its platinum blonde color by the time he was due to leave. However, once onboard the Hogwarts Express, he was more than a little angry that students from other houses kept walking by his compartment trying to catch a glimpse of him. Draco immediately pulled down the blinds, complaining loudly about anyone he didn't like in an effort to hide his embarrassment. He certainly had no idea how news of what had happened to him had gotten out; Slytherin's unspoken code of solidarity should have prevented it. But he had bargained without George Weasley.

Hermione slid open the door to George's carriage, Luna right behind her. "Can we speak to you?"

"We'll go and see Angelina." Fred stood up and pulled Lee out with him, but not before flashing a salacious grin at George and winking at Hermione and Luna. "We know where we're not wanted."

"But you don't..." Luna's protest that they could stay died on her lips when both boys hurried off.

George closed the carriage door. "What is it?"

"Did you pull the prank on Malfoy that everyone is saying happened?" Hermione got straight to the reason she was there.

"I might have done." George was smirking as he said it.

This, of course, gave him away. "Luna and I both told Neville it was you but he said that there was no way you could have done something that advanced. But when I heard about the fairies, I guessed it had to be you. So was it?"

"Is that why you came here? To find out about the prank?" George enquired.

Hermione went red. "Yes."

"What's wrong?" George had never seen Hermione look so uncomfortable before.

"I had a bet with Neville that it was you," Hermione admitted.

"I thought you said that betting was stupid and pointless," George said as he reminded Hermione of a previous comment she had made when she had caught him and Fred making a bet over whose chocolate frog could jump highest.

"It is but Neville more or less said that I had no idea what I was talking about..." Hermione hated her word being questioned, "...and I got mad at him and bet him three sickles that it was you."

"And when I told him that the fairies had told me it was you, he laughed at me," Luna added, her voice a little despondent. "So I had a bet too."

"Then tell him he owes you both of you three sickles," George said, confirming that he had been the culprit.

Luna beamed at George. "That will teach him not to believe me about the fairies talking to me. They also told me that Malfoy sleeps with a teddy bear at night."

Having witnessed the fairies conversing with Luna after she had first showed him the fairy spell, George could well imagine that what she had said about Malfoy might be true. "I'll have to remember that one."

Hermione was more interested in the logistics behind the spell rather than Malfoy's bedtime habits. "So, how did you do it?"

"Grab a seat." George nodded towards the seat opposite him before telling the two girls some of the spells he had used. "You know that I used Luna's fairy spell but I also used a sticking hex, a hair binding spell, a repeating spell, and an attraction spell."

Hermione was reluctantly impressed. "That really is advanced magic to combine all of those."

George confessed that he had not done it alone. "I had help, but if I tell you who from, you've got to promise not to tell Mum if she asks."

"Was it Fred?" Hermione guessed.

George shook his head.

Luna hazarded a different guess. "Was it Charlie?"

When George confirmed Luna's guess, Hermione showed her surprise. "I would have thought that someone of Charlie's age was above this sort of thing."

"He's known Luna since she was a baby," George told her, "and it was in her defense that he agreed to go along with the trick."

Luna was pleased but she was also surprised. "You did it because of what Malfoy did to me and Hermione at Easter?"

George nodded. "Yes."

"But that was ages ago." Hermione couldn't understand why George had waited so long to take action. "Why wait until now to get back at him?"

"I'm very patient," George announced. "And by leaving it this long, there would be no comeback on you and Luna."

Hermione was rather touched that George had defended her, but she still felt the need to lecture him. "That was really kind of you to do that for me. But you shouldn't have done it. You could have gotten into trouble if anyone had found out."

"I don't like it when people mess with my friends," George said in his defense, "and you and Luna are both my friends."

Luna was a little more effusive than Hermione, and she hurled herself at George, wrapping her arms around his neck and planting a kiss on his cheek. "And you're my friend." Then she released him and stood up. "If you want, during the summer you can come over and I'll show you some of Mummy's spell books, and then if you need any more spells to get back at Malfoy you can use them."

"Luna!" Hermione exclaimed her friend's name in a voice full of exasperation. "You can't encourage him to do that."

"But he's my friend," Luna said defiantly. "And Malfoy deserves it."

George grinned at Hermione. "She's right. He does."

"But he's done nothing wrong since Easter," Hermione pointed out.

"But he will," George said confidently, and he glanced over at the door as he spotted his mother walking by on patrol. "And don't forget you promised not to tell Mum."

Hermione flushed. "I don't renege on promises."

George apologized. "Sorry, but she'd ground me if she knew."

"So do you have plans over the summer?" Luna asked. "Except for coming to see me, of course."

George smiled indulgently at Luna. "I don't have much planned. But Katie's asked me to meet her for lunch next week, and I'm thinking of going."

Having been upset after Easter, Hermione was surprised to find that she was now not so concerned about George's dating life. "Are you two dating?"

George shrugged. "I was supposed to get together with her to go to Hogsmeade when Luna told me about the fairy spell and again last week, but both times I had too much homework, and I wasn't sure whether I liked her or not."

"But now you do?" Luna asked.

"I think so," George said, although he was undecided. "I'm going to take her to Zonko's. She's looking for some jokes for her little brother and she knows that I'll know which ones are the best."

Hermione stood up, not about to sit and listen to George talk about something she found rather boring. "I'm going to head back to my compartment. I'll see you in a minute."

George frowned as Hermione abruptly left. "She really doesn't like me doing tricks, does she?"

Luna agreed with him. "Nope, she certainly doesn't."

George shrugged and turned his attention to Luna. "So what spells..."

Next Chapter: Harry gets his long awaited visit to BritAD together with Ron.

I apologize for any typos but I've had a really bad bout of flu and amended this whilst taking medication! I'll look at it when I'm feeling more like myself but I wanted to get it posted.

Chapter 25: British Auror Division

Harry and Ron's first day at BritAD began with Amelia taking them into the Ministry and then into her office, where Harry looked around with interest. There was a large walnut desk in the room, and five matching walnut filing cabinets. A half-filled in-tray stood at the edge of the desk but the out-tray was completely bare. And apart from an ink-well and a blotter, there was little else to clutter the desk.

Amelia noticed Harry's interest. "I don't like untidiness, and I have a tendency to stay late to deal with everything in my in-tray. My assistant, Daniel, is usually here at five in the morning to deal with the incoming post, and he also deals with whatever I've placed in my outgoing tray from the previous night."

Harry had wondered what happened to the stuff that went in there. "Does he stay as late as you?"

"No, he leaves at around three o'clock in the afternoon unless there is something I really need him here for." As she spoke, Amelia opened her desk and withdrew a pass.

Harry could see that the pass had 'Trainee Auror Harry Potter' printed on it. "Is that for me?"

"It is." Amelia handed it over. "Clip it to your shirt and make sure you're wearing it at all times. I've authorized it so that you can gain access to almost anywhere in the Ministry but I would prefer it if you would only venture into the secure areas either with me or someone else in authority. Obviously in general areas you can go about freely as you wish." She handed a similar pass to Ron. "And the same goes for you, Mr. Weasley."

Ron wondered what the 'secure areas' were but he guessed he would find out eventually. "Okay."

"Auror Valeris will be here shortly, and she'll be introducing you to your first class," Amelia informed the boys. "Do you have your notebook, parchment, and quills?"

Harry patted his leather book bag. "Yes, thanks."

Ron smiled a little shyly. "And thank you for the letting me do this."

Amelia peered at the two boys over her half-moon glasses. "You're my test subjects."

Harry was a little puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Amelia began to explain her comment. "If things run smoothly with this trial run, I may allow future students who profess an interest in the training to also attend BritAD for a short period to see what it is about."

Harry was glad that his run-in with Quirrell might have some benefit for others, rather than just for himself. "What will we be learning?"

Amelia had changed the curriculum, and she relayed this on to Harry. "I've asked the instructors to review the seventh year curriculum during the first week of training. It isn't something that is normally done but after reviewing the training in general, I believe it will be of use to everyone, and it will help the new students gain a steady footing before we throw them in at the deep end."

"What used to happen?" Ron asked, curious to find out what they might have been in for if Amelia had not changed the curriculum.

"Previous trainees spent the first week in August learning new spells and the like," Amelia told him. "But after speaking to some of the course instructors, I decided that, since the students have had five free weeks since leaving school, or even longer than that in some cases, it would be better to conduct a refresher course first."

Harry told Amelia what he had originally believed. "Until Tonks told me more about the training, I had thought that the new students would start in September."

Amelia was not surprised that Harry had mentioned it; most of the trainees usually expected the training year to run from September. "That's the start of the school year. Here we start our first year of training in August, and the year ends in July. The trainees then have a month off before they start their second year."

"And it usually takes three years to complete the training?" Harry had taken out his notebook and a Muggle pen, and was writing down everything that Amelia was saying.

After giving him this opportunity, Amelia was glad to see that Harry was truly interested, although Ron was making no apparent effort to take notes. Amelia had no idea that Ron was too nervous to do so, and his failure to imitate Harry did not stem from a lack of interest. Unfortunately Amelia did not perceive this and so focused her response entirely on Harry. "Yes, unless a trainee fails their final assessment. In that case, dependent upon how poorly they did, they will either re-sit the entire third year, or just concentrate on the part in which they didn't do so well."

Not exactly happy with Amelia seemingly ignoring him, Ron tried to push aside his nerves and jumped in with a question when Amelia took a moment to catch her breath. "If I wanted to become an Auror how old would I have to be to begin my training?"

Amelia now turned her attention back to Ron, noting that even though he was writing nothing down, he was obviously listening to what she had to say. "If you decide to become an Auror, then you will start about five weeks after you finish your seventh year at Hogwarts, or, if you're an exceptional student, you will be allowed to take your NEWTS in sixth year and join us one year earlier, and like Auror Tonks you may be eligible for the accelerated two year program."

Harry looked up from his hurried scribbling, asking about something Amelia had failed to mention. "When would I have to submit an application?"

"At the start of your sixth year if you intend to finish your schooling early, otherwise at the start of your seventh year," Amelia informed him. "But I hope to see you here again at the end of your fifth year."

"Is that the age when other students will be allowed to do what we're doing?" Harry asked with interest.

"Exactly." Amelia had made an exception for Harry and Ron, but she was unlikely to do it for any other younger students in future. "So if you enjoy this, you may return again then."

Ron used the opportunity in the conversation to ask yet another question, this one filled with hope. "Would we be able to return every year?"

"Let's just see how you get along this time." Amelia was not going to say yes without seeing how well both boys performed.

"We'll do our best," Harry promised for both him and Ron, now as optimistic as his friend that they might be able to come back well before their fifth year.

"I believe you will," Amelia said, smiling warmly, before turning away from the boys at the sound of a knock on her door, and upon being bidden 'enter', a tall woman with black hair, and even blacker eyes, came in.

"Good morning, Ma'am." The woman nodded her head at her superior.

"Good morning, Auror Valeris." Amelia stood up. "This is Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley. Gentlemen, this is Auror Suki Valeris. She teaches defense, and she will be your first tutor for today."

After shaking hands with Amelia, Harry and Ron were led out of the office and along the corridor. "Thank you for coming to get us."

"It's my pleasure, Trainee Potter." Auror Valeris thought Harry was rather cute clutching his book bag and wearing an earnest expression. "During my class you'll be learning some of the seventh year defense spells that they teach at Hogwarts, and then you'll both be demonstrating them at the end of the lesson."

Even though Snape had been his teacher during the prior school year for Defense, it was still Harry's favorite subject, and since Minerva had taken over marking his essays, he usually got 'Outstanding' in his homework assignments. However, despite doing well in the subject, he was still rather nervous at the thought of having to try seventh year spells. Harry repeated what he had said to Amelia a few moments earlier. "We'll do our best."

"That's all I ask." Valeris opened a door. "In you go." Once inside, she turned to the trainees who were already seated. "Good morning, I am Auror Valeris, and I will be your defense tutor for your first year. I will learn your names as we go along. However, I am familiar with two of you already." She placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "As you probably all know, this is Harry Potter." She scowled at the

whispering that sprung up. "There will be no talking while I am speaking." The class immediately quieted down. "Accompanying Trainee Potter is Ronald Weasley. The boys will be spending this week with us as an experiment to see whether it will be of benefit for other students, who may wish to become Aurors, to experience firsthand the start of the training."

A girl Harry recognized held up her hand and identified herself when Valeris nodded. "Trainee Anna Jameson, Ma'am. Will Harry be expected to do the same work as us?"

"He will, Trainee Jameson," Valeris confirmed, and a show of hands materialized, which she ignored in favor of explaining what the trainees should expect during their first lesson. "We will initially be conducting a review of seventh year defense spells. And while I expect you all to know what I'm going to ask you to perform, due to their age and inexperience, I will be showing Trainees Potter and Weasley the wand movements first when we reach the practical section of this class. For the moment, please make sure you are ready to begin taking notes."

At Valeris' warning, the hands all lowered, and Valeris smiled down at the two boys, and in turn tapped their clothing, transforming them into the same trainee uniform the other students were wearing. "Take a seat, Trainees. At lunchtime, Trainee Jameson can take you to be outfitted correctly."

Harry chose the spare seat next to Anna Jameson and Ron sat next to him. Both boys then took out their things, Harry's Muggle ballpoint pen poised anxiously above the Muggle notepad he had also placed on the desk. Anna stifled an indulgent smile at Harry's already obvious enthusiasm, before turning her attention to Auror Valeris. It was a good thing she did; Valeris swept swiftly over the subject matter, and all of the students, particularly Ron and Harry, were hard-pushed to get down what she was saying.

After the theoretical portion of the lesson was over, the practical part began, and Harry watched nervously as each student went up to the front of the classroom and then performed a spell or hex. Several of them flunked their spells, earning them a demerit mark.

Harry thought that they looked rather concerned over a demerit mark but at that point he had no idea that twenty demerit marks

meant that a student had to leave the program, unless of course they earned enough merit marks to expunge any demerits that they had incurred. And, because the last student had performed their spell correctly, it meant that it was now Harry's turn, and he headed to the front of the class, his hands shaking slightly.

Valeris pulled out her wand, and as she had promised, she demonstrated the correct wand movement. She then repeated it, this time aiming her wand at a trainee and uttering, 'Ut Exsisto Occultus'. Anna Jameson vanished from her desk.

Harry didn't mean to gasp but he couldn't help it; Anna disappearing had been the last thing he had expected. "Where has she gone, Auror Valeris?"

Valeris noted that Harry included her name in the question, something one of the trainees had failed to do, earning her a demerit mark. "I've placed her under an invisibility spell. She's still at her desk – you just can't see her." She then uttered the counterspell, and Anna reappeared, a smile playing on her lips at the look on Harry's face.

Valeris then turned to Harry. "Your turn, Trainee Potter. If you would first practice the wand movement, and then aim your wand at me."

Harry's astonished look disappeared as he pulled out his wand and closed his eyes in order to concentrate. He then replayed the wand movement in his head that Valeris had just shown him and tried to imitate it. "I think I have it, Ma'am."

"That was good, Trainee Potter." Valeris gently encouraged Harry. "Now try the spell."

Harry aimed his wand at the teacher, and then again closed his eyes. "Ut Exsisto Occultus".

The class gasped in surprise much as Harry had done earlier, and Harry hurriedly opened his eyes to discover his teacher had vanished. "I did it!"

Valeris reappeared. "Well done. A merit mark for you, Trainee Potter, for an excellent effort."

The class knew that Valeris had given Harry one of the easier spells, but it was still quite an achievement for a student of his age to manage such a spell, and they had all expected Harry to fail. So had Harry, and he was more than a little excited that he had not only accomplished his goal but had also obviously been rewarded, even though he didn't know what a merit mark was. "Thank you, Auror Valeris."

"Now I want you to try it again, Trainee Potter, but with your eyes open." Valeris wanted Harry to be able to see what he was doing.

Harry thought over the wand movement once more, kept his eyes firmly on his teacher, and repeated the spell.

Once again Valeris disappeared, and, as before, she reappeared moments later. "In future I want you to keep your eyes open, Trainee Potter. I was standing in front of you but another time your target might well not be."

"Yes, Ma'am." Harry acknowledged his teacher's demand, and then on slightly shaky legs returned to his seat, glad that his moment in the spotlight was over.

Now it was Ron's turn and he was terrified, and it showed on his pale face, his freckles stand out vividly against his pale skin. Watching him move to the front of the class, Harry just hoped that his friend would be able to calm down enough to repeat the spell that Valeris would be showing him. He didn't. Ron completely blanked. "Um, I can't remember what the spell was."

Valeris once again ran through the spell but Ron's nerves by now were at breaking point and he messed the spell up totally three times, earning him a demerit.

Ron was understandably glum as the class was dismissed. "I'm rubbish. I don't know why Mum made me come."

"Because she knew I wouldn't want to come alone," Harry said, before trying to console Ron. "And you're not rubbish. That was a seventh year spell, and we're not as powerful as they are, nor have we ever practiced them."

"But you managed," Ron pointed out.

"My spell was easier," Harry argued. "And you were just nervous."

Ron blew out a long breath. "I suppose."

Their conversation came to an end as Anna Jameson grabbed Ron's arm. "Don't let one failure get you down, Ronald. At least you kept trying, and the Portus spell is really hard. I still have problems with it now." She then reminded the boys of Valeris' edict about their clothes. "Anyway, you don't have to worry about defense against until Friday, but we still need to get you two to be outfitted, and then you can keep me company at lunch."

"Thanks," Ron said, cheering up a little, and deciding that he rather liked the cheerful former Hufflepuff student.

Over lunch, he and Harry discovered that Anna was the only Hogwarts graduate there from her year. Of the other ten students there, one had failed the previous year and so was re-sitting the first year again, two had been privately tutored, two had attended Durmstrang, and the remaining five came from smaller schools dotted around the country.

They also discovered that all of them, including Anna, were pure-bloods. After what Tonks had told him about her being the only half-blood, Harry had deliberately asked about this point, particularly given that Justin, being Muggle-born, also wanted to go into Auror training. Anna had also informed Harry that very few Muggle-borns ever joined BritAD. After asking a few more questions, Anna announced that they had better head off to their next class, which was combat class, where they would be reviewing seventh year offensive spells.

Although both boys enjoyed the class, more so than the defense class of the morning in Ron's case, they also quickly discovered that despite padded floors, it hurt when your opponent hit you with a spell hard enough to send you flying. After his successful morning, it was Harry's turn to become rather despondent about his efforts in the afternoon, Ron not actually minding that he was being thrown through the air time and time again. Their instructor, a small man, who was conversely named Auror Large, told Harry it was to be expected; he was not familiar with seventh year spells, nor was he as powerful as those students who were in his class. As Large

backed up what Anna had said after Defense to Ron, Harry cheered up a little after hearing this.

When they arrived back at the Bones house with Amelia, both boys ate dinner and fell asleep on the sofa, much to Susan's chagrin but not to Amelia's surprise. Harry and Ron followed this routine all week, with combat and surveillance lessons in the afternoons, and varying subjects in the mornings: Tuesday was Charms, Wednesday was Potions, Thursday was Transfiguration, and Friday was Defense again. The two boys discovered that this would change as the year progressed with additional subjects being added in, and both of them wished they could stay for the entire course.

Harry and Ron's second week was to cement this wish even more, even though it was to be very different from their first, as they were to spend it with a qualified Auror who would be taking them out on patrol with him or her.

Ron was assigned to help an Auror Basil, a middle-aged man. Ron was beyond thrilled to discover that he would be visiting Azkaban with Auror Basil in order to collect some papers, a fact that Harry was jealous about when Ron told him at the end of the day.

Unfortunately for Harry, he was assigned to an Auror Canton, a young woman who was determined to do everything she could to climb the career ladder, the result of which was that she was extremely sycophantic, and Harry found this more than a little nauseating. Because of Harry's celebrity, Amelia had wanted to keep Harry close by, and so Canton had been assigned to remain within the vicinity of the Ministry, and Canton seemed to know everyone there, at least anyone who was somebody of import. Poor Harry had found himself cringing at the young woman's obsequious behavior, and he had tried to spend most of the time fading into the background. Regrettably, however, Canton had not hesitated to introduce Harry, wrapping her arm around his shoulders and informing anyone who would listen to her, that she had been specially chosen to take care of him.

Having been given permission to take Harry out onto Diagon Alley at the end of the second day, by the fourth, Harry wished he was back in the combat rooms, even if he had spent most of his time flat on his back. Just as she had been within the Ministry, Canton was at her toadying best on Diagon Alley, and coming into the Liaison

Center to begin their fourth day together, she wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders. "Are you ready for another day, Trainee Potter?"

Harry wanted to run screaming from the room at her sickly friendliness, but instead he forced a smile, and responded with a lackluster, "Yeah."

Wrapped up in herself, Canton failed to notice Harry's lack of enthusiasm. "Then let's be on our way."

Their departure was, however, halted when a cloaked man moved into their path, and informed Canton that he was relieving her of her burden. "Good morning, I would like to steal Trainee Potter from you."

Canton was not about to let Harry leave with anyone without the proper credentials, not even if he looked like an Unspeakable, and she therefore held out her hand. "Before I can release Trainee Potter, I will need to see some I.D., please."

Harry watched curiously, and more than a little hopefully, as the cloaked man handed over a badge similar to the one that Harry had been given by Remus. It obviously checked out, as Canton handed it back, and her expression changed from severe to fawning. "Will Trainee Potter be back today, Sir?"

The man shook his head. "No, Auror Canton."

"In that case, I'd like to say that it's been a pleasure taking Trainee Potter under my wing so far this week," Canton said, almost quivering with excitement that this Unspeakable knew who she was.

"I'm sure it has, Canton. You may return to your normal duties for the rest of the day."

Canton turned to Harry. "Trainee Potter, this is Unspeakable Amicus. You should treat him with the utmost respect."

"I will," Harry said brightly, delighted that he was about to be released from Canton's clutches.

"Then we'll be off." Remus knew only too well what this woman was like, and he was going to be having words with whoever had been in charge of assigning Harry to her. "This way, Trainee Potter."

Harry followed the man out, and then into a private elevator. "Where are we going, Amicus?"

"I thought you might like a change of scenery, Harry."

Harry broke out into a grin. "Thanks for rescuing me."

"No problem. This way." Remus led the way to a familiar door, which Harry knew led into the spinning room, and once inside Remus called out, "Amicus, Unspeakable. Harry Potter, Temporary Auror Trainee. Access Corridor Gamma One."

Harry was thankful though when the room stopped spinning and they were able to head towards Remus' office. "Why did you come for me?"

Remus closed the door and took down his hood. "I wanted to see what you've been learning, and to see if you wanted to take things a little further in your training with me."

Harry's face brightened as he sat down. "In here?"

"No, we have a training room," Remus explained as he handed Harry his Unspeakable's cloak and badge, having collected them from Molly's before arriving at BritAD. "But you'll need these as I don't want to have to answer any questions as to what a Trainee Auror was doing in there."

After putting on his cloak, Harry followed Remus out of his office and for a day of training. When it ended, Harry was returned to Remus' office, where he dropped tiredly onto a chair. "I wouldn't have thought doing the same spell over and over again would be so tiring. I didn't feel this tired when I first did it in Auror Valeris' class."

"Like all spells, casting the vanishing spell sucks power from you, albeit in this case a small amount," Remus told him, passing Harry a large glass of chocolate milk. "Therefore casting it a few times wouldn't affect you, but repeating it time and time again would."

"But I was doing it okay without having to do it over and over," Harry said, and he took a large gulp of the milk before continuing, "so why did you make me keep repeating it?"

"Because casting a spell in conditions where there's no pressure is one thing," Remus said, taking a mouthful of the tea he had made for himself, "and casting it when your life may depend on it is another. I want you to be able to cast any of the spells I'm going to teach you as if they're second nature."

Harry recalled what Remus said about addiction. "But you said that I'd become addicted if I did lots of Dark Magic, and we spent all day on the invisibility spell."

"That spell was a Light spell but when you begin using the Dark Arts you'll only be casting those spells for short periods every two weeks or so," Remus said. "You'll eventually learn to master the spell but you won't be affected by the pull of Dark Magic."

"Is that how you learnt?" Harry asked.

Remus shook his head. "I plunged in and practiced continually, but as I'm already a dark creature I had no problem resisting the urge to continue using Dark Magic after my training was over, and my trainer knew this."

"Okay then," Harry said, "so does everyone else learn it like you're going to be teaching me?"

Remus had to admit that they didn't. "No, but they still have to take breaks between days of casting Dark Magic spells so that they can recover." He took another mouthful of tea as he watched Harry frown. "I told you I won't be forcing you to do anything you don't want to, and I'll be doing everything I can to ensure your safety, Harry. I know you think I'm being overly careful but it's better this way."

Harry's annoyance at being treated differently vanished as he realized Remus was right. He therefore moved onto another subject, and asked about a subject he had meant to bring up earlier that day after being collected by Remus. "Remus, do you rank above the Aurors?"

Remus was well aware that Harry was asking because of how deferential Canton had been towards him. "I do, except for Bones, and Aditi Nessa."

Harry's frown returned. "Nessa? I've heard that name before."

"Probably because she's Bones' second in command," Remus said, before he also frowned. "Are you all right?"

Harry nodded, his frown still marring his forehead. "Yeah." He then shook himself and looked hopefully at Remus. "Am I going to be doing this tomorrow?"

Remus shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I hadn't even had any intention of beginning your training yet but given how miserable I know you were feeling, having come across you yesterday..." At Harry's surprised look, Remus explained, "I was finishing up a job when you and Auror Canton came into the store I was working in."

Harry tried and failed to recall Remus. "Were you in disguise?"

"Yes," Remus said, smiling. "As the job ended sooner than I expected and I had some spare time, I decided that we should make a start. Unfortunately I have other business to attend to tomorrow."

"What about when I come to stay with you?" Harry asked, wanting to continue with his training even though he had found it boring repeating the same spell over and over again.

"We'll do something a little different then," Remus said. He got to his feet. "I'd better return you to the Auror Liaison Center. I have no doubt you'll want to tell Ron what you were up to, and you can but..."

Harry shook his head and interrupted. "He didn't do so well the first week, and he'd be upset if he thought that I was getting special treatment."

Remus offered him an alternative explanation. "Tell him then that you did receive special treatment but only because it was felt that you needed the extra training so that you didn't flunk the training session. It will make him feel better."

"I'm not sure he'll believe me," Harry said, having already done well. "I've got four merits and he's got two demerits."

Not being privy to Harry's results, Remus winced. "Ron must be feeling a little despondent then."

"He thinks he's rubbish," Harry revealed.

"In that case, I think you'd better just tell him that I asked a friend of mine to check in with you, and he took you off Auror Canton's hands as he was bored and wanted to see what you could do," Remus decided.

Harry agreed, but in the end he didn't have to tell Ron anything. Ron had had a great day helping Auror Basil to escort prisoners into the courtroom. Ron hadn't known that the prisoners had all been accused of very minor crimes, and believing they were rather dangerous, it had consequently made him feel important. Harry had therefore said quite truthfully that his day had been boring.

The next day, Harry was relieved when, instead of going to the Liaison Center to meet up with Canton, he and Ron, together with all of the other first year trainees, were summoned to a room with a golden globe in it; the room was similar to the one he had been in with Remus before, only this one was bigger, it had two rows of chairs in it, and Amelia Bones was waiting for them at the front of the room.

Amelia dismissed the Auror who had escorted the trainees in, before beginning her address. "As you all probably know, I am Amelia Bones, Head of British Auror Division, and I always oversee this part of the training. Please sit down."

Everyone sat down, most of them a little nervous at dealing with the Head of Auror Division, and Amelia knew that. "Let's get the unpleasant part over with first."

Harry wondered what she was talking about, but he guessed from their worried looks that the trainees clearly knew what it was. Amelia continued speaking. "As you know, each and every one of your tutors, and this includes your mentors, have assessed you during this two week period. Accordingly, I have reviewed what they have

to say," Amelia broke out into a big smile, "and I am pleased to announce that all of you have passed your induction period."

Happy murmurs and smiles were exchanged amongst the students. Amelia hadn't finished though. "Now that you've been accepted on the program as full trainees, I will be using the Magus scale to measure your magical levels." She then went on to explain how the Magus scale worked, mostly for Harry and Ron's benefit, having no idea that Harry already knew. During her speech worried looks had begun to appear again until Amelia continued, "These levels, however, will only be seen by me, and in no way will they influence your right to remain in the program." Amelia could see relief amongst the group. Moving things along, she began by choosing the highest ranked trainee over the two week period. "I'll start with Trainee Jameson. Please move over to the scale and place your hands on it."

Anna did as she was bidden, and after a few moments, a small golden square lit up in front of her telling her that she had scored exactly two hundred. A similar figure appeared on the square that was in front of Amelia, and she noted down Anna's test results before clearing the scale. "Trainee Dunn, you're next."

Dunn stepped onto the scale, and he was a little disappointed by his reading of one hundred and seventy, but he did not show this when he got off. Instead he was smiling as though he had gone off the scale. One by one the remaining trainees went through the motions until it was Harry's turn.

This time, aware of what to expect, Harry was not as nervous as the first time he had been tested by Remus. "I'm ready."

Amelia checked the reading, her eyes widening somewhat. "Thank you, Trainee Potter. Trainee Weasley, you're up next."

Ron closed his eyes, rather nervous that he would not measure up to his friend. His thoughts were interrupted by Amelia. "You can open your eyes now, Trainee Weasley."

Ron opened his eyes to see that the readout was much better than he had expected. "Thank Merlin!"

The class burst out laughing at Ron's apparent relief. Ron glanced over at Amelia and apologized. "Sorry, Ma'am, but I was really nervous."

"I could see that, Trainee Weasley." Amelia was rather amused by Ron's half embarrassed, half worried expression. "Please rejoin your classmates."

Ron did so, and then the entire group was promptly dismissed. As they walked out, Harry fell into step with Ron. "So are you going to share, Ron?"

"One hundred and thirty-two." Ron looked anxiously at Harry. "How about you?"

Having been surprised at how much his power level had jumped in the space of a year, Harry was a little reluctant to tell Ron his score, but he didn't want to lie to his friend. "One hundred and seventy-one."

"Wow!" Although he was pleased for his friend, Ron was a little jealous. "I'll never be that powerful."

"I'm sure you will," Harry said confidently. "You're not that far behind me, and you heard Madam Bones say that above average pure-bloods usually register higher than that."

Ron shook his head, Amelia also having explained that wizards of his and Harry's age would probably register at about one hundred and twenty-five. "I'm only just above average now."

"But the important thing is that you were above average, Ron." Anna Jameson, who had been listening to the two boys' conversation, refuted Ron's claim. "And you've got a lot of growing to do yet."

Ron still did not believe he would rank as high as Harry one day. "I still won't ever be as powerful as Harry."

Anna, who had overheard Harry sharing his test result, had to agree with Ron. "Maybe not, but I have the feeling you'll still be powerful in your own right."

Ron wavered. "Do you really think so?"

Anna nodded. "I do, and if it makes you feel any better, I also have the feeling that Harry is eventually going to easily surpass me."

Not feeling quite so down now, Ron had another question. "What did you get?"

Anna didn't want Ron feeling downhearted and so she lied. "One hundred and eighty."

Ron had a sneaking suspicion that the girl was lying, and he was about to call her on it when Trainee Dunn joined in the conversation. "Thank goodness for that. I was really worried when I only scored one hundred and seventy."

Glad that she had inadvertently been able to bolster two people's confidences, Anna smiled at Ron, who had revised his opinion that Anna was lying. "See, I told you." She then stopped at the Liaison Center. "This is where I have to leave you. I hope to see you both again."

Ron was surprised to be hugged by Anna, before she did the same to Harry and went on her way. Ron then headed off to join his mentor, who had just walked in, and Harry began to look around for Auror Canton. He was both surprised and pleased when a voice said, "Wotcha, Harry."

"Tonks!" Harry exclaimed in delight. "Have you seen Auror Canton?"

"She's been reassigned." Tonks led Harry off.

"Oh! Do you know why?" Harry asked, although he suspected that Remus had had something to do with it.

"No." Tonks shook her head. "At least you have me now." Tonks had been surprised when she had been to act as Harry's mentor for the day.

"I'm glad," Harry admitted. "She reminded me a little of Percy Weasley."

Tonks snorted out a laugh. "She does, doesn't she? But don't tell anyone I agreed with you."

"You know I won't." Harry smiled at the girl he had grown close to during his stay at Susan's home. "What are we doing today?"

"A quick scan of the foyer, and then out onto Diagon Alley," Tonks said as she led Harry out to the main foyer.

On entering the foyer, Harry glanced around in shock. There had to be at least two hundred witches and wizards in the area. "Why are there so many people here?"

"That's what I'm about to find out." Tonks raised her voice. "This is official BritAD business. Please clear the way."

Even with the authority she possessed, Tonks found it difficult to make her way through the crowd, which mostly seemed to be made up of women. When she reached the front of the melee, she discovered the reason for it. "Mr. Lockhart, I need you to move along."

"It's Professor Lockhart, dear girl." Gilderoy stopped signing a smiling picture of himself, and he pulled out a certificate that authenticated his new title and position.

"Professor Lockhart," Tonks said in a firm voice, "I still need you to move along. You're blocking a public right of passage."

"Mitchell Cosgrove, Daily Prophet. Can I get a picture of you, Professor, and one of our finest?" a tall, greasy-haired man asked, having shouldered his way through the crowd, using his large camera as a battering ram.

"No, you may not!" Tonks snapped. She was about to touch her wand to her throat to tell everyone to move along when Lockhart spied her companion.

"Well, I never." Gilderoy stepped over to Harry. "It's Harry Potter."

Mitchell Cosgrove knew a photo opportunity when he saw one. "Get a little closer."

Gilderoy didn't need telling twice, and he immediately put a firm arm around Harry's shoulder pulling him tightly against his side. "Smile, Harry."

Harry blinked rapidly as a blinding light made him unable to see for a moment, and then a hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him away from the pink-clad Professor. "Harry, are you all right?"

Harry recognized the voice of Amelia Bones, and after blinking several more times, he was able to see her properly. "Yes, thank you, Ma'am."

"Madam Bones," a skinny, vulture-like reporter, who went by the name of Rita Skeeter, said, "is it true that Harry Potter has joined British Auror Division?"

Amelia would have normally said 'no comment' but in Harry's case this would have caused more trouble for the boy than it was worth. "No, it is not." She put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Mr. Potter has merely been given an opportunity to experience what it is like to begin Auror training."

"Is this special treatment for the Boy Who Lived or is it open to anyone?" Rita asked, her quill poised ready to take down Amelia's answer.

Amelia hadn't planned to reveal her idea yet, but she was now forced to. "Mr. Potter was not alone in his training, as he was joined by a classmate, and their successful experience will open the doors to six students per year to sit in for a fortnight at the start of first year training."

"And what do they have to do to get in?" Rita pressed, realizing that even though Harry hadn't been given special treatment, this was still a good story, and she intended to get the exclusive on it.

Amelia set out what she had decided. "They have to be academically successful, have a bona fide interest in becoming an Auror, and they will have to be at least a fifth year at Hogwarts."

"So Harry Potter or his classmate aren't really eligible to be here, are they?" Rita asked in a sly voice.

"Mr. Potter is one of the brightest students in his year, and he made the request directly to me," Amelia said, not quite truthfully, as she had been the one to approach Harry. "After reviewing his school record, and that of his classmate, already having the student program in mind, I decided that it would be an opportunity to test how someone even younger than those I'm willing to accept would deal with the course. If such young students could complete the two week trial successfully, as they both have, then I was certain that fifth years and above would be able to cope."

"So the fact that Harry Potter is good friends with your daughter has nothing to do with it?" Rita questioned the woman, not in the slightest bit interested in who Harry's classmate was that had attended BritAD with him.

"Not at all." Amelia turned to face the crowd, who had almost forgotten about Lockhart in the excitement of seeing the Boy Who Lived in person. "And if anyone else other than Mr. Potter had asked, they would have received exactly the same scrutiny and consideration that he did."

Lockhart had gotten fed up with no longer being the center of attention, and he shifted his position so that he was standing next to Harry again. "Well, I for one, as a professor, think that it's a most excellent idea."

"Why, thank you, Gilderoy." Amelia's tone was somewhat frosty. "Now that I have your seal of approval, perhaps we can move things along."

Harry found himself being led away by Amelia, while Tonks, and several Aurors who had joined her, began to disperse the crowd. Only once they were in Amelia's office, did Harry ask, "Who was that woman?"

"Rita Skeeter." Amelia's tone indicated how she felt about the woman. "She's a nasty gossip and has a tendency to twist things around to suit her. Be warned, Harry. You may not like what she writes about you."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"You'll see." Amelia did not have time to tell him. "Harry, I'm sorry but I'm due in a meeting. Wait here, I should be back shortly. I'll send Daniel in to check on you."

Harry found that Amelia was as good as her word, and Daniel, a tall black haired young man, had provided Harry with not only beverages and a snack, but also books and magazines to read while he waited. He didn't have to wait long though, for Amelia was back within an hour. "I'm sorry about that, Harry."

"I wasn't supposed to be here, anyway," Harry reminded Amelia. "I should have been out with Tonks."

"After this morning, I decided you were better off away from the newspaper hounds." Amelia knew that Skeeter would not have left if Harry had remained in the vicinity.

Harry was not that interested in the reporter, but he was interested in the possibility of returning. His face red, and his voice a little hesitant, Harry therefore made a request. "Amelia, is there any chance I can come back again next year? You sort of said that I'd done well to that reporter, and so I was hoping..."

Amelia picked up a packet that was in her in-tray. "Let me just read this and I'll answer you."

Harry waited patiently, wondering what was in the packet. He soon found out, when Amelia laid the packet down. "None of the tutors had handed in a report on you, but I asked them to do so last night so that I could decide on whether the program was going to be a viable option or not," Amelia revealed.

Harry was a little surprised. "But you told that Skeeter woman that I'd been successful."

"I wasn't going to tell her that I had no idea what your tutors thought about you." Amelia was not surprised though by Harry asking. "And you'll be pleased to hear that they all had nothing but good things to say about you, Harry, especially Auror Valeris."

"I really liked her." Harry went redder, having developed a bit of a crush on the Auror.

Amelia kept her smile under control. "She's a very capable Auror, Harry, and I'm glad that you liked her." She now had a decision to make, and she fell silent while she debated Harry's earlier request. "In the light of your outstanding performance, I'm willing to allow you to return for one week each year, up until fifth year, when you will have to apply like everybody else."

Harry's face lit up. "Thank you." He then asked after his friend. "What about Ron?"

"I'm afraid that is something I will have to discuss with Mr. Weasley," Amelia said, Ron not having done nearly as well as Harry academically, although his mentor had only good things to say about Ron's conduct during the week, and had indicated that Ron had the right temperament and attitude for the job. Amelia looked at her watch. "I'm going to turn you over to Arthur Weasley now. I'll collect you at six, then we'll collect Ron, and then go home to fetch Susan, and we can all go out to dinner."

"Thank you, Amelia," Harry said, getting to his feet. "I've really enjoyed the last two weeks."

"I'm glad to hear it, Harry." Amelia sealed the packet containing Harry's assessment back up. "Come on, I'll take you to see Arthur."

Harry's head shot up when Amelia came walking into Arthur's office at four. "Good afternoon, Ma'am."

Arthur echoed Harry's words, before asking, "Is everything all right?"

Amelia shook her head. "I have to attend an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot, and I therefore won't be able to take Harry and Ron out to dinner tonight."

"I do have something on but I can take them home before that," Arthur offered. "They were supposed to be coming home tomorrow anyway, so one day sooner won't hurt."

"That would be perfect." Amelia turned to Harry and held out her hand. "It's been a pleasure, Harry."

"Thank you, Ma'am." Harry found himself wondering about his clothing.

Ron, who had also finished early, shook hands as well, and he asked what Harry was thinking about. "What about our stuff?"

"I'll arrange for your things to be sent over to your home." Amelia put both boys' concerns to bed. "And I'll tell Susan that you'll see her on the Express." Amelia then turned and left, the two boys sitting back down to wait for Arthur to finish what he was doing.

Next Chapter: Severus tries to plant the diary on Harry; Harry's quidditch trial doesn't go to plan.

Chapter 26: First Kiss

Harry was about to board the train when a voice calling his name stopped him. Harry turned around. "Yes, Professor?"

"I believe you dropped this." Severus held out a small black book.

Harry looked closely at it but didn't reach out and take it. "I don't think so, Sir. It's got someone else's name on it." Harry pointed at the lettering on the book. "T.M. Riddle. Perhaps it belongs to a first year."

Severus' attempt to deposit the diary openly had failed. He therefore slipped it into his cloak before responding brusquely, "You should hurry up and board. You don't want to be late, Potter."

Harry didn't need telling twice. He hurriedly climbed onboard, glad to be free of Severus' scrutiny. Ginny patted the seat next to her. "I saved you a spot."

Harry flopped down next to Ginny. "Snape just tried to give me a book that didn't even belong to me."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"It had someone else's name on it, Riddle or something, and Snape still thought it was mine," Harry explained. "You think he would have noticed that; he notices everything else."

"Probably just couldn't be bothered to find its proper owner," Hermione decided, smiling when the compartment door slid open and George and Fred appeared. "Hi."

George sat down next to Hermione. "Did you enjoy the rest of your summer?"

Fred snorted as he dropped down beside Harry. "You should know that already. You wrote to each other practically every day!" Fred began to blow kisses in the air.

"Stop it, Fred!" George snapped as he got to his feet. He then addressed everyone. "Do you want to find somewhere else to sit rather than sitting with this idiot?"

Despite being aware that it was his teasing that had caused George's reaction, Fred experienced more than a little hurt, since George usually always sat with him. "It's okay. You stay here with your girlfriend. I'll go and sit with Lee."

"Hermione is not my girlfriend. And I didn't just write to her every day, I wrote to everyone else I'm friends with too!" George barked out, before giving the others an explanation as to Fred's behavior. "He's just miffed because his girlfriend didn't write to him every day."

"George, it's okay. I did the same. I wrote to Harry every day when he was away from the Burrow, and he wrote back almost as often," Ginny announced, well aware of how tired her brother was of his twin's comments.

Hermione added her tuppenceworth. "I wrote to Harry a lot as well."

"That's what friends do, as George just pointed out," Harry said, smiling. He then got up. "I know it's early but I'm going to find the trolley witch."

Feeling more confident that nothing was likely to happen this time, Hermione also got up. "I'll come with you."

As they left the carriage, Ginny turned to George. "Do you think she likes Harry?"

George was well aware that his sister still had feelings for Harry. "They're just friends, Gin."

As they swayed their way up the carriage, Harry chatted lightly to Hermione about the holidays, until they reached the area just outside of the toilets that joined to the next carriage and Harry looked through the door. "There's a bit of a queue."

"Let's wait here for a moment until the line gets smaller," Hermione suggested.

The two talked for a while about the last couple of weeks of the holiday until the train gave a shrill scream and with a jolt it entered a tunnel, throwing Hermione against Harry as they hit a curve in the tracks. Putting his arms around Hermione, Harry held onto her,

feeling her breath against his cheek as she was jostled against him in the dimly lit carriage.

Hermione could also feel Harry's mouth against her cheek, and she had no idea why she did it, but she turned her head so that her mouth brushed against his.

Harry's stomach jolted as Hermione's lips touched his and he reacted instinctively, tightening his grip on Hermione's waist as he closed his eyes and kissed her.

Hermione's hands, which had grabbed at Harry's shirt to hold herself upright, tightened reflexively and she closed her own eyes and returned the kiss.

Suddenly the train gave yet another screech and shot back out into daylight, flooding the alcove Harry and Hermione were standing in with bright light, which penetrated both of their eyelids and they broke apart at the same time.

"Sorry!" Hermione immediately blurted out.

"No, I'm sorry," Harry said. "I shouldn't have done that. I like someone else." Then he wanted to bang his head against the wall as a hurt expression crossed Hermione's face.

A little upset, Hermione asked. "Who?"

"Ginny," Harry admitted, having grown closer to the young girl over the last week of the holidays. "I was thinking of asking her out. But now, I can't."

"Of course you can," Hermione said urgently, feeling mortified about what she had done. "It was just an accident and it was my fault, Harry. Let's just forget it ever happened."

Harry was well aware that he had wanted to kiss Hermione, but given that his friend was obviously embarrassed, he agreed with her. "Okay."

"And ask Ginny out," Hermione urged, not wanting Harry to change his mind because of something she'd done.

Harry was now torn, and feeling a little confused about what to do, he glanced inside the carriage next door. "There's still a queue and so I'll go back and sit down."

"I'll, um, wait here," Hermione said, glad of a little breather to think over what she had just done.

When Harry returned to the compartment, George looked up. "Where's Hermione?"

"There's a queue and I got fed up of waiting," Harry said, sitting down.

George got up. "I'll go join her."

Still reeling from the kiss, Harry sat down. Ron, who had come in with Neville in Harry's absence, looked askance at Harry. "Are you okay?"

Harry nodded. "I'm fine."

They then started talking, and, although Harry went a little red when Hermione and George returned, their arms full of sweets, he was able to face Hermione without too much discomfort.

Once in Hogwarts, the six children all split up, moving to their own house tables. Harry winced when Susan grabbed his hand, the strength of her grip bordering on painful. "What is it?"

Susan's face had become a portrait of adoration. "Look, it's Gilderoy Lockhart. He's here at last."

Harry rolled his eyes, remembering his first encounter with the effeminate teacher. "Oh joy!"

"You're just jealous because all the girls have stopped looking at you," Susan responded, and she let go of Harry's hand to drop her head into her hands to stare dreamily at the coifed teacher.

"I can promise you that I'm not jealous of him." Harry met Justin's eyes, who put two fingers in his mouth imitating a gagging effect, having long ago joined the Harry and Luna wagon of not believing in the man after all.

"It's all right, Harry," Susan lifted up her head and kissed Harry's cheek in a friendly gesture. "I still prefer you."

Severus interrupted Susan's kiss. "Ten points from Hufflepuff for such a disgusting public and inappropriate display."

Harry couldn't stop the scowl that settled on his features, and Severus remarked on that as well. "Problem, Potter?"

"No, Sir," Harry ground out.

"Keep it that way." Severus continued on his way to the head table.

Susan found herself almost in tears. "I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't mean for us to lose points."

Harry started to fish in his pocket for a handkerchief for Susan – Harry's aunt had ground it into him that he should always carry one – but he was beaten to the mark by Gilderoy Lockhart who, with Snape blocking their view, neither of them had noticed getting up from the table. "For you, dear child. I saw your tears when I was on my way over to say hello again to Harry here."

Susan's tears instantly dried up, and she clutched the lilac embroidered handkerchief to her breast. "Thank you, Professor Lockhart."

"So you already know that I'm going to be teaching here?" Gilderoy was a little disappointed. "Did Harry spill the beans?" Gilderoy had expected a mention in the Daily Prophet after his trip to the Ministry but instead the newspaper had been full of Amelia's plans and Harry's part in them.

"No, I didn't. Professor McGonagall told us last year you would be taking up the DADA Professor's position, and you're sitting on the head table," Harry got in before Susan could respond. "She also said that you couldn't start last year because you were on a book tour."

Gilderoy missed the sarcasm dripping from Harry's every word. "I was promoting Magical Me, my autobiography. Big seller, you know."

But I'd be happy to let you and your pretty girlfriend have a signed copy."

Harry scowled. "Susan is not my girlfriend."

Even though she felt a pang of dismay at Harry's hurried denial, Susan's joy at the offer from Lockhart overrode it. "I'd love a signed copy, Professor. I've read everything else you've written, and of course I already own *Magical Me*, but it isn't signed."

"Then a signed copy shall be yours, dear child." Gilderoy flounced off, leaving behind a delighted Susan and a disgusted Harry.

On the head table, Severus watched Gilderoy moving among the pupils. "He's supposed to be up here."

"I'm sure he'll return shortly." Minerva, however, was beginning to wonder what Albus had been thinking when he had signed the man up. It almost looked to her as though they would have another Slughorn on their hands, and that Gilderoy was trying to "collect" the students.

Gilderoy did eventually rejoin his colleagues, as only then could the first years be brought in and sorted. Minerva noted during the sorting that Gilderoy listened carefully as the name of each child was called, no doubt hoping that some of them had famous parents with whom he could possibly network. Minerva had no idea that Gilderoy's interest was far more nefarious than mere networking, and his interest lay in possible new sources of material for his next book.

Harry too could not help but take heed of the new arrivals as Harry found himself being stared at by some of them. Only after checking out the wizarding world's most famous individual, did those in the know turn their attention to the other famous occupant of the Great Hall. Susan saw Harry's frown, and this time she correctly interpreted his annoyance. She therefore squeezed his hand sympathetically under the table, and whispered to him, "Don't worry it will only last for a short time, and then it will stop."

Sitting opposite them, Ginny flinched at the sappy look that Susan gave Harry. She also heard Susan's not so quiet whisper, and added an observation of her own. "Not if Dennis Creevey turns out to be as bad as his brother, it won't!"

"Don't even go there." Harry scowled when he thought about the Gryffindor who had followed him around like a puppy dog for the best part of the previous year, trying to get photos of Harry until Fred had sent him off with a flea in his ear.

Ginny glanced over at the Gryffindor table. "Take a look, Harry."

Harry followed Ginny's line of sight to where Colin was pointing in his direction, no doubt telling his younger brother, who had just been sorted into Gryffindor, exactly who Harry was and where he was sitting. He groaned softly. "So it looks as though I'll be hiding from both of them this year then."

All talk ended when the Headmistress stood up and began to introduce the teachers.

One Week Later

Harry rubbed his head. "I wish I could shift this headache."

"I thought you went to Madam Pomfrey." Justin thought Harry was starting to look a little pale.

"I did go to see her and it went away for a while, but it seems to have come back." Harry shivered.

Ginny placed a hand on Harry's head. "You feel awfully warm."

Harry picked up his broomstick and shivered again. "Perhaps the rain will help cool me down."

"Perhaps you should sit this out," Justin suggested, not entirely sure that playing in the light rain that was falling would be such a good idea. "Or ask Cedric to postpone it."

"I'll be okay." Harry smiled a little wanly. "Let's go."

Justin was already carrying the broomstick his mother had bought for him, and Ginny picked up the one that she had chosen from the school shed, and her best friend Meredith had brought a broomstick from home. Unlike Harry, Justin, and Meredith, Ginny was trying out for chaser. Having seen both boys fly, she was aware that they

would likely beat her in the trial, particularly Harry, so she had decided to challenge herself and try for a different position.

By the time the children had arrived at the pitch the light rain had abated. And since seeker was the first position to be decided that year, Harry, Justin and Meredith immediately took to the air, Harry wishing that the rain would start up again to help cool him down. Once he was hovering about the stadium, a shivering but hot Harry had to shake his head to try and clear the constant ringing that was going on in his ears. Determined to recover from the malady that threatened to overwhelm him, Harry shot after the first snitch he saw, his fingers wrapping around it, and he placed it in his pocket. Just as he zipped up his pocket, a wave of nausea washed over him, and Harry was forced to lean over his broomstick, and unable to stop himself, he vomited onto the ground below. Luckily there was no one below him.

In the stands, Susan grabbed Hermione's arm. "Harry's been sick."

"I can see that." Hermione loosened Susan's death grip. "It's probably just nerves." But even she had to admit to herself that she was worried; Harry had looked almost green when he had walked onto the pitch.

Harry's first bout of nausea was followed by a second and third but he still plodded valiantly on. He had just caught his second snitch when his world began to spin, and he murmured softly to himself, "This isn't good." Then his world went black.

Susan and Hermione both screamed when they saw Harry losing his grip on his broomstick. "Harry!"

Both Justin and Meredith had already spotted Harry's predicament and were heading in his direction. However, it was Cedric Diggory, who had been hovering to watch the seekers play off, who reached Harry just in time to stop him plummeting to the ground, sliding an arm around the now unconscious boy, and helping to maneuver him to safety, calling out to those sitting below, "His body feels like a furnace."

As soon as Cedric lowered Harry to the ground, Ron, who had been watching close to the edge of the pitch with Neville, placed a hand on Harry's forehead. "You're right. He's burning up."

Ginny, Susan, Hermione, and Luna, who had had her head buried in the Quibbler when Harry had started to collapse, all finally reached the huddle, Susan dropping to her knees in the wet grass. "Harry?"

"He's out cold." Cedric pulled her back. "I'm going to take him to the medical wing. Weasley, can you give me a hand? The rest of you can stay here. Justin, can you monitor the goalkeeper trials just until I get back?"

The two boys looped their arms around Harry's back and headed towards the school, all three girls except Ginny trailing behind them. Justin turned to Ginny, surprised that she had not accompanied Harry. "You're not going with them?"

"You need chasers for the goalkeeper trials, and that's the position for which I'm trying out." Ginny looked longingly in the direction Harry had left in, before she picked up Harry's broomstick. "You might want to put this somewhere safe."

"You should use it, I'm sure Harry wouldn't mind." Justin had seen Ginny fly when they had all stayed at the Burrow for a long weekend, and he had been more than a little impressed at the young girl's prowess on a mediocre broomstick.

Ginny looked hopefully at Justin. "Do you really think Harry wouldn't mind?"

Justin knew Harry well enough by now to be able to comment on his friend's reaction. "Of course he wouldn't."

Ginny's face split into a delighted grin. "Thanks, Justin."

"You deserve a fair chance." Justin then turned his attention away from Ginny, and he began to bark out orders, before he picked up the clipboard that Cedric had lain out on the bench and started to make notes as he watched the players, tickled pink that Cedric had trusted him enough to do this.

Cedric returned after a short while but after glancing at Justin's meticulous notes, he told him to continue. "Don't let me stop you."

Only once the goalkeeper trials ended, did Justin have a chance to question Cedric. "How's Harry?"

"Madam Pomfrey thinks he's got some sort of flu, perhaps dragon flu." Cedric hadn't stayed long enough though to get a confirmation on Harry's condition. "She also said that you can see him when you've finished here."

After passing on news of Harry, Cedric yelled to the players milling around. "Right, it's time for the chasers and beaters to get up there together." He glanced at Justin. "You can continue to take notes if you'd like as I need to be up there."

Justin heartily agreed to do so, and he focused his attention on what was going on. Afterwards, Cedric took his arm and led him to the side. "Your notes match my thoughts almost perfectly. I'd have to get it passed by Professor Sprout but if you make the team, would you like to be the vice-captain?"

"Vice-captain?" Justin repeated. "But there's no such position."

"There will be as from this year," Cedric informed him. "It's in case the Captain is ever injured or falls sick."

"And you want me?" Justin could feel his entire body shaking with excitement and nerves.

"I'd planned on asking Juliette but you've just shown me that you're on the same page as I am, and I think we'll work well together." Cedric held out his hand. "So are you in if you make the team?"

Justin grabbed the proffered limb. "Yes, thank you."

"Okay, we need to re-run the seeker trial again, so go tell all those who might be interested now that Harry is out of the picture to get on their broomsticks." Cedric took the clipboard back from Justin. "And that of course includes you. We don't need to take notes for this one."

Justin was about to grab his broomstick when Cedric's comment about his friend finally filtered into his brain. "Harry is out of the picture?"

"If it is dragon flu, Harry is going to be out of a lot of things for quite some time." Cedric knew that Harry would be disappointed but he had a duty to ensure that the next best person took Harry's place. "But I know he caught two snitches before he collapsed, and I'll make a note of that."

"Thanks." Justin did the math, quickly realizing that Harry's snitch catching total was likely not going to be enough to even make reserve, but there was nothing he could do about it, and so he headed off to get on his broomstick.

Twenty minutes later it was all over. Ginny, who had decided to try out after all because Harry had collapsed, had caught one snitch, Justin had three, and most surprisingly, Meredith had caught four. Cedric called the flyers over. "Well done. The results will be posted tonight. Justin, I will tell you that you've made the team as reserve, and as such qualify for vice-captain. Are you free to talk to Professor Sprout now?"

A delighted Justin nodded. "Let me just give my broom to Ginny."

The two boys then headed for Pomona Sprout's office, Cedric knocking politely, even though the door was wide open. "Professor Sprout, can I have a word?"

"Of course, Cedric." Pomona got up, and closed the door behind the group. "Would you like some milk and biscuits?"

"Thanks." Cedric loved spending time with his head of house, and he would be spending even more time with her now that he had been made a prefect. "It's about the vice-captain's spot. Justin has just made reserve seeker, and I would like him to fill the VC's position. He's made some excellent notes."

Pomona took the notes that Justin had made, and she skimmed over them, asking Justin a question as she read, "So, Justin, tell me who would you appoint for each position?"

Justin's palms began to sweat under the scrutiny of his head of house, but he stuck to his convictions. "Goalkeeper: Huston, Reserve: Matthews; Seeker: Harker, Reserve: myself; Chasers: Weasley, Diggory, and Groves, Reserve: Smith; Beaters: Seaton and Ollis, Reserve: Lock."

"What happened to Harry?" Pomona questioned the omission of her star player.

Cedric explained what had happened. "... and so I'm afraid Harry won't be making the team."

Pomona was disappointed but she just had to hope that Meredith would do her best to fill Harry's shoes. "Thank you for telling me. Now what is your opinion of Justin's choices?"

"I would have gone the same way except for one of the beaters. I'd use Lock and put Seaton in reserve," Cedric announced.

"Then that is the team we'll go with." Pomona gave Justin a smile that was overflowing with pride. "Justin, you will be vice-captain. And if all goes to plan, you'll take over from Cedric when he leaves in three years' time."

Justin's eyes grew wide. "Take over?"

Cedric realized that Justin was truly shocked. "Yes. As vice captain, when I leave, as long as you remain on the team, then you'll become my replacement."

"Me become Captain?" Justin squeaked, his voice still full of the amazement he was feeling. "I can't believe it."

Pomona smiled at the younger boy. "Justin, you should believe it."

"But I thought that someone like Harry..." Justin stopped speaking when his head of house held up her hand.

Pomona was not surprised by Justin's thoughts. "Harry is an excellent seeker but that does not necessarily mean he would be a good captain. After reviewing your notes, I believe you would. The notes you made are methodical, you get along with everyone from what I've seen, and Cedric obviously thinks you're a good enough quidditch player."

Cedric corrected Pomona's comment. "He has the potential to be a great quidditch player."

"Thank you." Justin's voice was shaking.

Pomona reached into her desk and pulled out several cloth badges. "These are for you to have placed on your quidditch shirts."

"Thanks, Professor." Justin reverently took the badges.

"You can head off now." Pomona had a few things she wanted to talk to Cedric about that were not quidditch related. "I'm sure you want to check in on Harry. Please give him my regards."

"I will, Professor, and thank you both again." Justin was aware that he was being overly effusive, but he was unable to help himself.

"You've earned it." Pomona smiled yet again. "Now run along."

Justin did exactly that, and when he reached the hospital wing he went in search of his friend, only to discover that it was indeed dragon flu and that Harry had been quarantined by Madam Pomfrey. "How long will he be in quarantine?"

"At least two weeks." Poppy Pomfrey noticed the vice-captain's badges that were still being clutched by Justin. "Congratulations, Mr. Finch-Fletchley."

"Thank you, Ma'am." Justin wondered when he would stop saying the words 'thank you'. "Can I see Harry at all?"

Poppy was aware that Justin probably wanted to tell Harry about the quidditch trial, although she doubted Harry would be saying anything for a while. "Before you do, I need to check you to see if you have any symptoms of dragon flu yourself."

Justin gripped his badges tighter, alarm filling him at the thought that his chances of becoming captain one day might all come to a premature end. "But I don't feel ill."

"Maybe not, but you have been in constant contact with Mr. Potter," Poppy reminded him as she waved her wand over him. "You're clean. I'll just use a charm on you so that you don't breathe the same air as your friends. But only five minutes, mind you."

Justin then had his first experience with the bubble-head charm, and he was allowed into what he thought was a side room. He was more than a little surprised to find that the room had ten beds in it, and that not only was Harry in there, but so were Susan, Hermione, and George. "You're all sick?"

"No." Hermione shook her head. "But we're all showing minor symptoms of the dragon flu."

"Why did it take so long to come out?" Justin sat down in a chair. "I mean it's been weeks since Harry was in contact with Charlie, and he didn't have dragon flu."

Hermione explained what the matron had told her, almost verbatim. "Madam Pomfrey said that some people are carriers and don't show symptoms, which was probably what happened with Charlie. The flu virus then migrates to the next person, for example, Harry, where it incubates for several weeks before it becomes full blown dragon flu. Since the disease is airborne, the whole school is going to have to be tested. They're announcing it in a few minutes' time at lunch."

"So the hospital wing could become very busy." Justin was relieved he had tested clean. "Was Luna clean?"

"Yes." Hermione nodded her head. "As were Fred, Neville and Ron."

Justin walked over to Harry, whose bed was surrounded by an opaque bubble, which was helping him breathe. "Harry?"

Harry opened his eyes but they were unfocussed and quickly closed again. "How long before he wakes up properly?"

"Madam Pomfrey said he will probably be like this for at least two days." Susan's voice was full of worry. "And it will be at least two weeks before he leaves here, and it could be a few months before he's fully recovered."

"Wow!" Justin used one of Harry's favorite words.

"How did the trials go?" George knew that he was a shoe-in to make the Gryffindor team again, and he was hoping that his infection didn't turn into a full blown episode.

"I'm reserve seeker," Justin announced proudly, and he held up his badges. "And vice captain."

"Vice captain?" George questioned.

Justin explained what he had been told. "I suppose they'll announce it to each team as the trials start."

"Harry's not going to make the Hufflepuff team, is he?" George's voice carried the pity he was feeling for his unconscious friend.

Justin slowly shook his head. "Fraid not."

"Poor Harry." Susan knew that despite Harry's initial reticence, he had grown to love the game.

"Is Diggory seeker?" George knew how much the boy wanted the spot.

"No." Justin surprised George. "Meredith Harker is." He then rose to his feet as the bubble around his head began to shrink. "I'd better go. Madam Pomfrey said I could only have five minutes."

"Can you arrange for someone to get my homework to me?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"I'll do the same for all of you," Justin promised. "See you when I can."

As it turned out, no-one else in school had contracted dragon flu, much to Madam Pomfrey's relief. And when George and Susan showed no signs of getting any worse, they were also released. Unfortunately for Hermione, her infection mutated, and she ended up in a condition similar to Harry's.

Harry coughed loudly. "Ouch, I wish my head would stop aching."

"I wish you would shut up!" Hermione didn't mean to bitch but she felt awful; she had even ignored her homework.

Harry understood exactly how Hermione felt, and so didn't take offense. "Sorry."

"I'm sorry too." Hermione was grateful that Harry had lowered his voice. Now that they were alone and able to converse, albeit quietly, she brought up something she had been wanting to ask about for a while. "Harry, why didn't you ask Ginny out?"

Harry went red. "I decided that I didn't like her enough that way."

"Is it because I kissed you?" Hermione went redder than Harry as she asked.

Harry didn't want to lie to his friend but he was also nervous about being truthful, and so he went middle of the road. "A little."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said in a quiet voice, and then when Harry didn't answer, she brought up another question. "Why do you suppose we got dragon flu the worst?" She didn't give Harry a chance to answer, moving on to ask another question. "Do you think it's because of what happened on the train?"

Harry nodded, making him wince as his head ached. "Yeah. I'm really, really sorry if I caused you to get the dragon flu."

Hermione waved off Harry's apology. "Harry, it's okay. You had no idea that something like this would happen, and it wasn't your fault, it was mine." Hermione then coughed and clutched her head again. "Ow! Ow!"

Harry called out softly, "Barnes."

A house-elf, who was immune to dragon flu, was acting as a go-between for when the children needed something. "Yes, Mister Harry?"

"Can you please ask Madam Pomfrey if Hermione can have something for her head?" Harry asked politely. "And me as well if I could."

"Yes, Mister Harry," the house-elf responded and disappeared.

Hermione smiled gratefully at Harry. "Thanks."

"No bother." Harry glanced over as the door opened and Madam Pomfrey came in. "Can we have anything?"

"Yes, you can, Mr. Potter." Poppy held out vials to each child. "Because neither of you has been sleeping well, I have also included a mild sedative."

Not really wanting to go to sleep but having little choice in the matter, Harry took his potion, and before the nurse had left, his eyes began to close, and the world faded away.

Next Chapter: The diary finds a new home; Harry has a run-in with Malfoy; Justin reveals the girl he likes.

Chapter 27: A Diary Bound Friend

October 7, 1993

Gilderoy Lockhart was ecstatic. He truly believed that his lessons were being well received and this had put him in a fantastic mood. Whistling as he jauntily headed along the corridor, his arms full of books and papers, he failed to notice Severus coming the other way.

Severus swore softly under his breath as Gilderoy careened into him, sending both men's burdens crashing to the ground. "Watch where you're going!"

"I do apologize, Severus, old man," Gilderoy said as he knelt down and began to scoop up books. "This is going to take some sorting."

Severus grabbed several books that Gilderoy had picked up. "I think I can tell a Potions book from your own writings."

After a short while, the mess was sorted out, and Severus stormed off. It was only when he reached his rooms that he realized that a very important book was missing, and cursing, he turned and headed back out to the corridor he had just come from. After searching for a few minutes, he realized that the diary had either been taken by Lockhart or picked up by someone else. Either way, Severus just hoped it was not someone with a brain.

Reaching his office, Gilderoy began to tidy up his pile of books, frowning as he came across a diary with the name 'T.M. Riddle' on it. "Now that name rings a bell."

Sitting down at his desk, he began to look through his student registers. "Not there."

Opening up the diary, he looked inside and was rather disappointed to discover the diary was devoid of any writing. "So no clues there either." As he sat pondering the name on the diary, he absentmindedly began to doodle on one of the pages. He was more than a little surprised to notice that it was clear when he looked down at the page. "How strange."

Picking up a different quill, he tried writing his name. It disappeared, seeming to sink into the pages. Suddenly writing appeared. 'Gilderoy Lockhart? Is that your name?'

Gilderoy was more than a little annoyed that the diary had no idea who he was, not once stopping to ask himself why it would even be asking. 'I can't believe you've never heard of me.'

'Tell me a little about yourself.'

Twenty minutes later, Gilderoy stopped writing, and the diary came back with a response. 'So you must be very clever.'

Gilderoy preened visibly although there was no-one to see. 'Of course I am.'

'Is that why you're teaching at Hogwarts?'

Another flurry of writing ensued on Gilderoy's side.

Three weeks later

Harry came excitedly into library. "Guess what, there's some sort of wild animal roaming the grounds."

"How do you know?" Susan joined Harry when he sat down at the table next door, the one she was already sitting at being full.

"I've just gotten back from Hagrid's. He said that something slaughtered all of the roosters," Harry revealed.

From the other table, Luna gasped. "That's horrible."

Harry had almost forgotten how fond Luna was of animals, and he hurried to agree with her. "Yeah, it is."

"Does Hagrid know what did it?" George asked.

"He reckoned on a fox." Harry watched Justin's face drop with disappointment. His friend had obviously been expecting Harry to mention some sort of exotic animal. Harry hadn't quite finished though. "Or maybe a big rodent."

Susan shivered. "I think I'd rather it was a fox."

"Did it eat any of the roosters?" Unlike Luna, Hermione was more interested in the nitty gritty of the matter rather than the welfare of the roosters.

Harry shook his head. "None, they were all just ripped to bits."

"Then it wasn't a fox," Hermione said in an authoritative voice. "They'll usually kill everything, but they also normally eat one or two of their kill."

"Perhaps they were disturbed," Neville suggested.

"Probably," Harry agreed. "Anyway, the Headmistress is going to announce that we can't go out after dark until they discover what did it."

"The Headmistress is getting involved?" The voice of Gilderoy Lockhart came from behind Harry, but instead of his usual annoyingly melodic tone it came out in a squeak, and he coughed to clear his throat.

Hermione thought the teacher looked rather pale. "Are you okay, Sir?"

"Just worried about you lovely children," Gilderoy said in his usual voice, before he started to turn away. "Well, I have things to do."

Hermione and Luna looked at each other, Hermione voicing Luna's unspoken thought. "That was weird."

"He's always weird," Harry broke in. "I mean, look at the homework he's given us..."

Unaware of Harry's discontent, outside of the library, Gilderoy stilled and held out his hands to discover that they were shaking. Slipping one hand deep into his trouser pocket, he pulled out a single black rooster's feather that he had found on his bed that very morning. "I couldn't have done it."

Hurrying back to his room, Gilderoy opened the diary, and wrote in it, 'I'm afraid I might have done something terrible.'

The diary wrote back, 'What?'

Gilderoy wrote down what had happened and what he believed he had done, and then he waited for a response. After a few moments the diary responded, 'Perhaps you brushed against something and picked up a rooster feather. Or it could have been trampled inside on a shoe, and you accidentally managed to get it stuck on you.'

At the sensible suggestions Gilderoy let out a long sigh of relief and wrote back to the diary, 'I couldn't remember going to bed last night, and I was really concerned that I might have sleep-walked and hurt the roosters, thinking that they were some terrible monster I've faced before.'

'Never mind. You can relax now,' the diary answered in what would have been a soothing tone if it had been spoken rather than written. 'Get some rest, and we can talk again soon.'

Gilderoy closed the diary up and lay back on his bed; he was tired, and he closed his eyes, soon falling asleep.

Inside the diary, its occupant also slipped into a slumber, as it was not yet powerful enough to sustain a presence without Lockhart's touch.

Halloween

Harry leaned back against his chair, his stomach fit to burst. "I don't think I've ever eaten so much."

"Madam Pomfrey did say that your appetite might not be back to normal for a while so I didn't expect this." Ginny, however, was delighted that an overly thin Harry seemed to have found his normal appetite again.

"I was hungry," Harry said in his defense. "But I wish I hadn't had that last toffee apple."

"But they were good." Justin too had eaten himself almost into a stupor. "And..."

Whatever Justin had been about to say was lost when one of the first year Gryffindors, whose name Justin did not know, came dashing into the Great Hall in tears. "Help, somebody help."

Minerva rose from her seat and went hurrying down to the young girl, who promptly collapsed in tears. "Miss Gladstone, whatever is wrong?"

"Dead cat and writing in blood," the girl managed to spit out before dissolving into masses of tears again.

Minerva, however, had not finished questioning her. "I know this is hard but I need to know where."

"Second floor," the girl managed to get out before it all became too much for her, and she began to sob hysterically. Filius took her from Minerva. "Miss Hardcourt, can you escort Miss Gladstone to the Hospital Wing and ask Madam Pomfrey to give her something for her nerves."

"Right away, Professor." Esther Hardcourt rose from her seat and slid her arm around the distraught girl's shoulders. "Come with me."

Minerva turned around. "Prefects will escort their houses back to their dormitories. Teachers are with me."

When Minerva reached the second floor, she soon came across what the girl had seen, and she read aloud the writing on the wall. "The Chamber of Secrets has been opened, Enemies of the Heir, beware." She turned around to find Filch in tears. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Filch."

"She was with me from a kitten," Argus began to howl. "My poor baby."

"Let's go and get a cup of tea." Professor Sinistra, who was a cat lover herself, took pity on the grieving caretaker and led him away.

Minerva stared at the message. "I think that had better be erased." She aimed her wand at the message, only to frown when the spell she had used failed. "Something else then." Time and time again her efforts were for naught. She turned to Severus. "Perhaps you know of something else."

"I do believe you've covered everything that I'm aware of, Headmistress." Severus himself was a little surprised at the stubborn nature of the writing.

"Then let me." Gilderoy swept forward, his wand in his hand. "Okolo Vadulu."

He was so intent on his efforts that he missed Pomona muttering under her breath, "Absolute poppycock."

Minerva's lips twitched involuntarily. "Gilderoy, I fear that this is beyond even someone as learned as you."

"I believe you are right, Headmistress." Gilderoy sighed dramatically. "I'll leave it in your capable hands then."

Minerva decided to try a different method, and moments later a new façade appeared. "Let's hope that this works, and that this doesn't escalate."

However, schools being what they were, soon the entire populace was aware of what had been written. It didn't help that the words had quickly reappeared on the brand new façade. Minerva had therefore asked Argus to try and scrub the words out, which the caretaker did with an angry gusto but even his efforts failed, and so Minerva had to give up, the words eventually fading on their own after a week. But the pupils' interest did not fade in the same way, and it soon came out, courtesy of Gilderoy Lockhart, exactly what the Chamber of Secrets was - a supposedly secret room that had been built by Salazar Slytherin - and the school began to guess who the Heir might be. However, when no possible taker could be worked out, as Minerva had hoped, the talk eventually died down.

Harry sat in the library, trying to wrestle with his Arithmancy homework. He had quickly discovered that he hated the class and wished he had taken something else. Normally Hermione would be around to help him, but she had agreed to go watch the quidditch match with the others.

"What's up, Potter?" Draco Malfoy's voice came from behind Harry. "Can't bear to watch Ravenclaw grind Hufflepuff into the ground, or perhaps you don't want to see a second year girl in your place."

"I have homework, Malfoy," Harry snapped, the subject of quidditch for him still very raw. "So go away and let me get on with it."

Draco laughed. "I think little Harry Potter is jealous of Harker, and that's why he left his homework until now, so that he wouldn't have to see how much better she is."

Harry gritted his teeth and tried to ignore Draco, who continued to make derogatory remarks about him and nice ones about Meredith. In the end though, Harry snapped, "If you think Harker is so wonderful, why don't you ask her out on a date?"

"Whoo!" Greg Goyle teased Harry.

Draco was a little more eloquent. "Hit a nerve, did we, Potter?"

"Just go away, Malfoy." Harry ground the words out from between clenched teeth. "I've got better things to do than discuss quidditch with you."

"That's only because you're no longer on a team, unlike me, Potter!" Draco smirked at Harry.

"You only made the team because Daddy bought your way onto it," Harry retaliated. "You couldn't catch a snitch even if danced behind your back for several minutes." Harry grinned. "Oh yes, that's what happened in your first match, wasn't it? Colin Creevey..."

Harry's words were cut off when he had to duck from a purple spell that was flung at him. Madam Pince, who had heard the contretemps between the two boys, stepped in. "Stop that at once, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco turned, his wand pointing at the librarian, and for a moment he debated sending a curse at her as well. But commonsense settled into his brain, and he lowered his wand. "You're nothing, Potter."

"Enough!" Irma Pince's voice hardened and grew louder. "Mr. Malfoy, twenty points from Slytherin, and a detention with Professor McGonagall."

"But that's not fair," Draco yelled back at the woman. "He started it."

"Not from where I was standing, he didn't." A former Slytherin, Irma unwillingly defended Harry. "Now unless you have any homework to do, I suggest you leave my library."

Draco threw an evil look at the woman before nodding to Greg and Vince, and the three of them left. Harry stood up. "I'm very sorry, Madam Pince. I shouldn't have allowed him to make me angry."

"No, you should not, Mr. Potter." Irma peered at Harry. "And for doing so, I'm taking twenty points from Hufflepuff. Now make sure you clean up before you leave. I don't want ink stains marring my books."

Harry wanted to scream at the injustice of the librarian's deduction of points but he had little choice except to accept them. "Bloody Malfoy." Harry kept his voice below hearing range while he cleaned up his desk, before making his way back to Hufflepuff.

On entering the common room, he discovered everyone celebrating. Hufflepuff had beaten Ravenclaw by almost two hundred points, and Justin was being feted as the man of the moment. Harry took one look at the festivities and headed for his dormitory. He was not alone for long, Justin coming in after him. "You have a face like a wet afternoon."

Harry told him what had gone down with Malfoy. "The little toe rag cost us twenty points."

"I shouldn't worry too much about that," Justin commiserated with Harry. "I got more than that yesterday for my work in Ancient Runes if you remember."

Harry ignored Justin's comment, and he continued to rant about Draco Malfoy. "It still sucks that that jumped up little prat can just buy his way onto the team." Harry flopped onto his bed. "It's not fair."

"I know." Justin sat down on his own bed. "And I'm sorry you can't play quidditch this year."

"I shouldn't resent Meredith, but I do." Harry could feel tears close to the surface. "Why was it only me who got dragon flu so badly?"

"Don't forget, Hermione got it as well," Justin gently reminded Harry. "Although to be honest, I had thought it would have been Ginny or Susan who should have come down with it that badly."

"Why would you think that?" Harry's tone suddenly became defensive. "They've all spent time with me."

"But Ginny's the one you seem to spend most of your time with, and she barely got a cold, to say nothing of how close you are to Susan; unless you've been spending some secret time with Hermione that we don't know about." Justin laughed at his own comment, and he continued to tease his friend. "So, Harry, have you?"

"Of course I bloody haven't." Harry's irritability was not improved by Justin's rather close to the mark comment, and he got up from his bed his tone angry as he continued, "You know as well as I do that Hermione is just a friend."

"Harry, I'm sorry." Justin immediately apologized when he realized how upset his friend was. "I shouldn't have said that. I was out of order."

Harry wanted to turn around and tell his friend that yes he was, but he couldn't. Instead he responded in a quiet, guilty voice, "No, you're not."

Justin took a few seconds for what Harry was insinuating to sink in. "You're seeing Hermione as well?"

"No!" Harry's voice became a high-pitched screech, and he started coughing, showing that the infection still hadn't been entirely eradicated from his system.

Justin passed him a glass of water. "Then what are you talking about?"

Harry came clean. "Hermione and I kissed."

"When?" Justin asked, more than a little surprised at what his friend was revealing.

"On the train on the way back to school." Harry took another sip of water, and then told his friend what had happened. "...and we both said it was an accident, and that we wouldn't tell anyone."

"Don't worry I won't tell anyone either," Justin promised after listening to Harry's tale. He then gave a huge sigh. "How do you do it? I'm almost fourteen and I still haven't kissed anyone, and you're almost a year younger than me and yet you've managed it. And I know both Ginny and Susan like you."

"I like them too, more so Ginny," Harry admitted. "But after what happened, I'm not sure if I really want a girlfriend that much just yet."

"Why not?" Justin asked.

"Because I also like Hermione," Harry said, running a hand through his hair. "And if I can't decide who I really like, then perhaps I'm not ready."

"Well, I am," Justin said. "Father keeps drumming it into me that I'm expected to meet a suitable girl, - Justin pronounced it 'gel' as he mimicked his father – and then settle down and continue the family line."

"So you only want a girlfriend because your dad keeps on at you?" Harry liked to listen to Justin talk about his family, even though his father seemed a little strange.

"No, but it would help shut him up." Justin could not bring himself to tell Harry what else his father had said; he was far too embarrassed.

"Is there a girl you like?" Harry began to think of suitable candidates for Justin's girlfriend.

"No-one much." Justin went red as he said it.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Who is she?"

Justin sighed miserably and confessed immediately. "Cho Chang. But I've got no chance with her."

Harry knew that Justin was right with his comment. "Sorry."

"I'm sure I'll end up liking someone else." Justin brushed off Harry's commiserations. "Anyway, even if she wasn't going out with Roger Davies, I'm sure I'm the last person she would ever be interested in."

"What makes you say that?" Harry didn't understand where Justin was coming from.

"Because I'm me. Now if I was someone like you, I'd stand more of a chance." When Harry snorted, Justin listed what he saw as Harry's attributes. "Come on, Harry. You're famous, you're clever, and you're decent looking. I bet if Chang wasn't going out with Davies, and you asked her out, she'd say yes."

"I doubt that. I'm not good looking, and I'm not that clever." Harry disparaged Justin's comments, and besides, as pretty as Cho was, something about her left him cold. "And being famous doesn't count. Davies isn't famous and Chang still likes him, so you can rule that argument out, although he is, for a boy, okay looking." At Justin's dismal look, Harry tried to bolster his friend's ego. "Justin, there's nothing wrong with how you look, you're really clever, you're a nice person, and you're Vice Captain of the quidditch team. There's no reason why Chang wouldn't go out with you if she was free."

"Yeah right, Harry." Justin flopped onto the bed. "Anyway, Chang is never going to drop Davies; they've been going out together for over a year now, so why bother torturing myself?"

"You really like her that much?" Harry asked.

"Yes." Justin's head bobbed violently up and down. "Probably almost as much as you like Ginny, or Susan, or even Hermione."

Harry had to smile at the little list. "Probably."

Justin got to his feet and changed the subject. "I'm going to get a shower. I had to take over as seeker when Meredith got hit with a Bludger."

"I sort of guessed that when you were being thrown into the air and half of Hufflepuff were chanting your name," Harry remarked wryly before grinning at his friend. "Perhaps I shouldn't be so hard on her, and I should pick on you instead."

Justin grinned back. "I have to admit, I wish I was first string."

"Join the club," Harry said, also wishing he had been able to play. He grabbed his things for the shower. "You can tell me about the match while we shower."

Harry, however, was about to have his mind changed about dating Ginny when she surprisingly asked him out a few days later as they searched for a book at the back of the library stacks. "Harry, I have something to ask you."

Harry was a little taken aback at Ginny's nervous proclamation. "What is it?"

"Will you be my boyfriend?" Ginny blurted out the request before she could chicken out. After Harry had left during the summer to stay with Remus, Ginny had talked out what she wanted to do with her mother, who had said that if Ginny liked Harry so much, she should ask him out, but that she should also be prepared in case Harry said no. Worried about this possibility, up until then Ginny's courage had failed her.

Harry was totally stunned at first and said nothing. Embarrassed and believing that Harry was going to refuse her, Ginny went to turn away to look out of the window. "Forget about it. I'm sorry. It doesn't matter. I..."

"Ginny..." Harry grabbed Ginny's arm to turn her to face him. "...I'm not saying no. I just didn't expect you to ask me."

Ginny felt a little bolstered by the fact that Harry had not turned her down outright. "So will you go out with me?"

Harry was struggling for the right answer, and it showed in both his hesitant response and on his face. "I..."

Ginny could not help but feel upset and rejected. "Forget about it, Harry."

"It's not that," Harry said. "It's just that we live in the same house now. What if we went out together and then things didn't work out?"

Your family means everything to me, and I don't want to do anything to ruin that."

Ginny had already discussed this with Molly. "I know that, and I told Mum that I liked you. She said that if you did say yes and then things didn't work out, that I'd probably end up being hurt. But she also said that even if that happened, you're always going to be part of our family."

Harry was still unconvinced. "I don't know, Ginny."

Ginny's lip trembled. "Don't you like me at all? I thought during that last week over the summer you did."

"I do like you," Harry said. "But I'm scared if something goes wrong."

"So the answer is no?" Ginny asked, unable to stop a tear running down her cheek.

Harry felt bad for her, and being a sucker for tears, he changed his mind. "I'll go out with you, but you have to promise that if it doesn't work out, then we'll still be friends."

"Of course we will," Ginny assured him hurriedly. She then smiled shyly at Harry.

It quickly became apparent to Harry that she was waiting for him to do something. For a moment he wondered what she wanted, and then he realized: she was waiting for him to kiss her. His heart feeling as if it was in his mouth, Harry therefore did as he was expected to and pressed his lips against Ginny's in a chaste kiss similar to the one he had shared with Hermione on the train. Then he pulled back.

Having received her first kiss, which had been everything she had ever dreamed it would be, Ginny beamed happily at Harry and started talking about the assignment that had led to their being at the back of the library and Harry providing his help.

Harry was only half listening to Ginny; his mind was far from on what Ginny still had to get done. Instead it was filled with tumultuous thoughts about his first kiss with Ginny and how it compared to the one he had shared with Hermione on the train; that kiss had made

his lips tingle, his heart pound, and his legs feel weak. The one he had just shared with Ginny had done none of those things, and had simply been okay.

As Ginny blathered on, Harry began to wonder if he should have listened to his inner voice - the one that had told him to say 'no', and had made him initially hesitate when responding to Ginny. But Ginny had looked so upset, and Harry did like her, so he had said yes instead. It was only when he had kissed her that Harry realized that he had made a mistake. But it was too late now; he could hardly change his mind without upsetting Ginny, or without explaining his reasons for backing out. He just hoped that kissing Ginny would get better.

Harry had no idea that it would not. And he also had no idea that his decision to say yes to Ginny would inadvertently cause him a great deal of trouble.

End of Chapter: Justin's girl problem comes to an unexpected end; Harry gets signed up for something he doesn't want.

Chapter 28: The Dueling Club

Nothing further untoward happened in the school until a week after the Hufflepuff match when Gilderoy Lockhart made an announcement that caused both great joy and great consternation. "May I have your attention?"

The entirety of the Great Hall swiveled to look at the teacher, except for Harry and Justin, who both loathed the man who seemed to have a tendency to pick on Harry for his class demonstrations, and Luna, who had no interest in dueling or Lockhart. Now that he was the center of attention, Gilderoy visibly preened himself. "Professor McGonagall (here Gilderoy took a moment out to bow slightly to the Headmistress) has agreed to let me open up a dueling club."

Cheers, loud comments, and clapping filled the Great Hall, as Gilderoy basked in what he perceived as admiration, but was really excitement that the pupils might get to have a little fun. "Now, now, let me finish." Silence filled the Hall after a short time, and Gilderoy subsequently began to inform the students about this 'thrilling' opportunity. Having finished his breakfast, Harry rose to his feet to leave, only to regret doing so when Gilderoy immediately latched onto him. "I see that Mr. Potter wishes to be our first enrollee. I'll save you the trouble of writing your name down and do it for you."

Harry's mouth tightened, and not bothering to respond, he left the Great Hall. Justin also got up, and like Harry, was quickly 'enrolled' in the club. Also ignoring Lockhart, Justin ran out of the Hall after his friend, yelling out, "Harry, wait up."

"I don't want to be in his stupid club," Harry grumbled at Justin when his friend reached him. "He's an idiot. Look at what he did to those Cornish Pixies in Hermione's class."

Everyone in the school had heard about Lockhart letting a cage full of pixies go free, and then leaving the students to clean up the mess. Most people, well, most of the girls, had defended him saying that it was a good lesson for them, whereas the boys, who had quickly cottoned on to what a narcissist and rubbish teacher Lockhart was, had denigrated the man. However, Justin suspected that despite some students' misgivings about Lockhart, there would still be plenty of takers for the dueling club. "Don't go to the club then. Lockhart enrolled me, and I'm definitely not going."

"Good, because I'm not going to his bloody stupid club either," Harry snarled, before realizing he was ranting unfairly at Justin. He therefore stopped, took several deep breaths, and apologized. "Sorry, but I'm always so grumpy lately."

"It's okay, Harry." Justin patted his friend on the shoulder. "You're still not exactly yourself after your illness."

"You're telling me." Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "I swear I keep hearing voices in the wall."

"What do you mean?" Justin asked as he opened the library door for Harry.

"I don't know." Harry noticed his favorite spot was empty, and he made his way to the table furthest away from Irma Pince before sitting down. "It's almost like whispering, but I can't quite make out the words."

"It's probably just the ghosts," Justin surmised logically, before looking around the empty library. "Why did you come here? You don't have any books with you."

"Because it's Sunday morning, I want some peace and quiet, and I doubt that anyone else will come in here just yet."

"You're wrong." Justin had heard the door opening, and he turned around to see who it was. "It's all right though, it's our lot."

Neville, who had been forced into signing up for the dueling club by Ron, dropped miserably into a chair, while grumbling at his friend. "I can barely cast anything."

Ron reminded him of what they had been doing at Neville's home when his grandmother had been out. "You managed to cast stupefy on me when we were practicing."

"I just got lucky," Neville complained. "Every time I've tried since then it goes wrong."

"You were probably running on adrenalin," George informed the chubby boy, who had admitted that he had gotten a thrill out of doing

something wrong behind his grandmother's back. "But you need to keep practicing."

"Why bother?" Neville slumped even lower.

"Because one day..." George began.

"...you'll need to take your OWLs," Fred finished, doing a brilliant impression of his mother.

"That's a long way off." Neville dropped his face into his hands. "I'm not going to the club. It's not as if anyone will care if I turn up, unlike Harry."

"What do you mean?" Harry leant forward, making sure to keep his voice low so that it did not carry to the librarian who was staring suspiciously at them, particularly as none of them except for Hermione had any books with them.

"Malfoy was bragging that he was going to show you up in a duel," Ron said derisively. "Can't see that though; I mean he chickened out last time."

"I'm sure he's learnt a lot more evil spells since then," Luna piped up. "And that's probably why he got Galloping Goit Spackle."

Hermione, who was pulling out her homework, responded to her friend's dubious comment. "Luna, Malfoy has pimples, and not Goit Spackle but you're probably right about him knowing more spells. If he takes you on, be careful, Harry."

"I'm not going, so it won't matter." Harry said in a firm voice, folding his arms in a defiant manner as he finished speaking.

"But you have to go," Ginny pouted, her face taking on a pleading look. "I've signed up as well."

Harry refrained from saying something rude to his girlfriend. "I don't care. I'm not going."

Ginny's face fell, her lips trembled, and tears filled her eyes. "Please, Harry, do it for me."

As he always did when faced with a girl's tears, Harry caved. "Fine, I'll go once, but that's it."

"Thanks, Harry." Ginny kissed Harry's cheek, earning her a sarcastic remark from the librarian. "We'd better find somewhere else to talk."

November 26th 1993

"I'm going this stupid club one time only, and that's it," Harry said as he reluctantly headed for the first meeting of the dueling club, Ginny holding his hand as if she was afraid he was going to flee.

"I just know you'll feel differently after you've been once," Ginny quite wrongly guessed.

Harry rolled his eyes in disgust. "I doubt it."

"Oh stop it, Harry!" Ginny exclaimed, impatiently tugging him into the Great Hall.

Being pulled in, Harry had expected to see a large crowd but not what appeared to be most of the school. "Look at how many people are here. I really wouldn't be missed if I didn't stay."

Luna chose that moment to wave at Harry. "Harry, over here."

Because Luna's voice carried quite clearly, most of the Great Hall turned around, and Harry therefore had little choice except to join his friend. "Luna, I didn't expect to see you here. I'm surprised you came."

"I didn't sign up." Luna had every intention of having as little to do with Lockhart as possible. "But I thought you might like a friend here. I know you don't really want to be here at all."

Unlike Ginny's harping on at him, Luna's gentle support cheered Harry up. "Thanks, I really appreciate it, Luna."

"What about me?" Justin teased, having joined them just in time to hear Luna's comment.

"Lockhart doesn't pick on you," Luna reminded him. "Just Harry."

And speaking of the teacher, he flounced his way over to the stage and climbed up onto it. "Good evening, children."

Some of the older students scowled, not liking the 'children' comment, but nevertheless everyone turned to face the stage. Justin, Luna, and Harry all shared a disgusted look, before also turning around. Once he determined that he had everyone's attention, Gilderoy preened himself before starting to speak. "I would like to welcome you to the first meeting of the dueling club. Tonight I will be running the club with help from my assistant, Professor Snape."

Harry's eyebrows rose a little at the assistant reference, and he shared a quick smile of glee with Luna, who too thought it was rather funny, particularly as Severus was looking rather put out. After the Snape comment though, Harry switched off as Lockhart continued to bumble on until Harry finally realized that his name was being called. "Me?"

"Perhaps not." Severus stopped Lockhart's attempt to bring Harry to the stage. "I think we should start with a student who actually has some dueling experience." Severus scanned the crowd. "Zabini, Malfoy. Up here."

Hermione, who had slipped in behind Harry just moments earlier, whispered, "Luna was right about Malfoy getting more experience. I bet Snape has been helping him."

She shut up when Snape glared in her direction, but having gotten her point across, Hermione was happy to do so.

On the stage, Blaise Zabini readied himself for the duel. His mother was an excellent dueler, and he had the feeling that what she had taught him would exceed anything an idiot like Lockhart could impart. The only reason he was there at all was because Severus had made it mandatory for the entirety of Slytherin to attend. If Severus had to attend, then so did his house.

Across from Blaise, Draco Malfoy flourished his wand and started to position himself. He believed he would easily beat his roommate, his father having taught him quite a lot over the summer.

Severus waited until both boys had assumed the correct stance, before announcing, "You may begin on the count of three: one, two, three."

Draco immediately sent a fairly innocuous stunning spell at Blaise, and then skipped to his right to avoid the tickling spell Blaise had sent at him. Grinning, he sent a more vicious boils spell at Blaise, who returned fire with a spell that would have made Draco's skin turn purple and itch if it had made contact.

Draco's next spell, a stunning spell, missed Blaise by a mile, but Draco stupidly went right again to avoid Blaise's next attack, which was exactly where Blaise's disarming spell went, smacking Draco squarely in the chest. Blaise smirked as Draco's wand shot into the air and Blaise summoned it. "I believe I win."

"Not quite." Draco's hand was heading towards his sleeve, only to draw to a halt when Severus declared that the duel was over.

As Draco lowered his hand, Harry whispered to Ron, "I bet Malfoy had another wand, and Snape didn't want anyone to know."

As if he had heard them, Severus turned around, and beckoned with an imperious finger. "Potter, Ronald Weasley, get up here."

Harry was rather surprised to be pitted against Ron, but he did as he was requested, taking some enjoyment at the bewildered look Lockhart was currently displaying. The man clearly didn't like his dueling club being taken over by Snape, but he also patently had no idea how to stop him.

Ron stood opposite Harry, and, as Draco and Blaise had, he grinned at his friend as he raised his wand. Harry did the same. Snape then made a similar declaration as he had for the Slytherins, and Ron let rip with his favorite spell, a tickling spell, which missed.

Harry was not surprised that Ron had used this spell, and so he sent a stunning spell back at his friend, which Ron dodged.

Ron thought quickly and used a favorite of his sister's, the bat bogey hex, putting more power behind it than he had intended in his enthusiasm.

After avoiding the spell, Harry could see that Ron was determined to win, and so he used a spell they had found in a book at Auror Division library. "Arania Legio."

Ron gave a terrified scream as lots of spiders flew out of the end of Harry's wand and came towards him, and panicking, he also chose a spell that he had seen in the book. "Serpensortia."

Harry's eyes went wide as a massive green hued snake appeared in the middle of the dais. "Oh God!"

Ron gave another scream as the spiders reached him, only for them to vanish at a hurriedly dashed off spell by Snape. Unfortunately Snape's distraction gave Gilderoy Lockhart time to leap in to try to protect Harry. "I'll deal with the snake, old chap." Lockhart then dashed forward and aimed his wand at the snake, flourishing it in a limp wristed manner and incanting, "Ventilus Aspus."

The snake promptly flew into the air, landing back on the dais right next to where Susan was standing. Lockhart's actions had infuriated the snake, and it raised itself up and hissed menacingly at the girl it perceived to be at the root of its ill treatment, causing Harry to yell out, "Susan, get back."

Transfixed with fear, Susan couldn't move. She hated snakes with a passion, and this one was not only huge, but it was also lying right in front of her. Realizing that his friend was not going to do as he said, Harry shot forward and began waving his arms around. "Get away from her."

Gasps filled the room, but Harry didn't register them at all, his entire focus was upon the snake. He screamed at it again to get away, not for a minute expecting it to obey but it did. The large green snake then turned to look at Harry.

"Potter, stand away from that snake," Snape rasped out in an urgent voice. "I'll destroy it."

Luna, who had been standing next to Susan, made a distressed sound, and leapt onto the stage, placing herself in the line of fire before saying, "That's not fair. It isn't the snake's fault."

Harry agreed with his friend. "Luna's right, Sir. It's not the snake's fault. Perhaps we could get Hagrid to take it in."

"A snake in a school, Potter?" Severus sneered at Harry. "That would hardly be safe."

The snake, however, had made up its own mind, and while Severus and Harry argued, it had slithered quickly across the stage, wrapping its head around Harry's legs, and using its body to lever itself up. When the snake's head became level with his own, Harry swallowed nervously, unable to look anywhere but at the hissing snake. "What do I do now?"

Again gasps filled the room, momentarily diverting Harry's attention away from the snake, and he discovered that everyone was looking at him with varying degrees of horror, dismay, and confusion. Well, everyone except for Snape and Luna were looking at him that way; Snape was displaying his usual disgusted look that he wore when Harry was around, and Luna was looking delighted. But it was Susan's look of fear and horror that worried Harry the most, and in spite of the large animal that was now wrapped around him, Harry sought to alleviate her concerns. "Don't worry, Susan, it will be okay."

He was stunned when Susan simply turned and ran, the doors flying open when she got near them. Harry noticed Ginny going after her and he hoped she would be able to calm Susan down. He then became aware that Lockhart was talking to him. "I'm going to deal with this, Harry, never fear."

"I think not. You've already caused enough damage," Severus said as he stepped in front of the dandified teacher, and trained his wand on the snake. "Try not to move, Potter. I wouldn't want to hit you by mistake."

Something about Severus' almost pleasure filled tone disturbed Harry, and he hurriedly wrapped his arms, which were still free, around the snake's body, refusing to let Severus take aim. "Sir, we can't hurt it."

By now, Minerva had been made aware that something was amiss in the Great Hall, and she hurried down to the room in question.

When she entered, she found Harry and Severus in a stand-off.
"Professor Snape, what is going on?"

"The snake was conjured up during a duel, and Potter is refusing to let me destroy it, Headmistress," Severus explained.

"Mr. Potter?" Minerva wanted Harry's side of the story.

"It's not hurting anyone, Professor, and it's not its fault it was conjured up," Harry said in a low voice as he stroked the snake, feeling it shiver under his touch. "I think that Hagrid should make sure it's okay, and then maybe set it free."

"I agree," Minerva said, seeing no reason for killing the snake. "But we need to get it off you."

"I don't know how to get the snake off me, Professor," Harry glanced into the snake's face. "He seems to like it here."

Minerva paled when she heard Harry's response but she didn't gasp like everyone else in the Great Hall. "I think we should clear the Hall first. Professor Lockhart, if you would deal with that, I will deal with Mr. Potter and the snake. Mr. Marsters, if you could ask Hagrid to join us."

"What about Mr. Weasley?" Severus indicated a white and shaking Ron.

"You cast the spell?" Minerva asked Ron.

"Yes, Professor." Ron's voice was shaking as he responded.

"Where did you learn it?" Minerva asked in a suspicious voice.

Ron's face was full of guilt. "From a book we found at Auror Division, Professor."

"You should know better, Mr. Weasley..."

Harry interrupted Minerva's rant. "It's my fault, Professor. I used a spell on Ron first that I also found in a book when we were at Auror Division."

"What spell did you use, Mr. Potter?" Minerva asked.

Harry told her. "I thought it would be funny as I know he's afraid of spiders. I think Ron just panicked and use the snake spell without thinking."

Trusting Harry, Minerva had no reason to doubt his explanation. "Mr. Weasley, although you shouldn't have used it, did you have any idea what the spell would do?"

Ron shook her head. "No, Professor. Like Harry said, I just panicked when I saw the spiders coming towards me."

"Very well." Minerva accepted Ron's denial. "Ten points from Gryffindor for showing a lack of judgment, Mr. Weasley, and the same from Hufflepuff, Mr. Potter. You will also both serve a detention with Professor Snape. Mr. Weasley, you may go."

Ron shook his head. "I'd rather stay with Harry, and make sure he's okay."

Harry flashed Ron a grateful look. "Thanks, mate."

"Very well, you may stay," Minerva said before she focused her attention on Harry. "Let's get that snake off you."

"How will you get him off, Professor?" Harry found that he was entranced by the snake.

Minerva didn't get the chance to answer Harry, the snake getting there first. "I am not male, snake speaker."

Harry could see the Headmistress's face, so he knew that she hadn't been the one to speak. "Who said that?"

"I did, snake speaker," the snake said as it moved its head closer to Harry's as it spoke.

Harry went rigid with surprise. "But you're a snake."

"I am," the snake confirmed, "and you are a two-legged snake speaker."

"Harry," the Headmistress interrupted, "I need you to ask the snake to release you. Tell it that it won't be harmed."

Harry immediately presumed that the Headmistress had put some sort of translation spell on him. "Okay." He looked directly at the snake. "Can you please let go of me? The Headmistress has said that you won't be hurt."

"Very well," the snake hissed at Harry, and then uncoiled itself from around Harry and settled on the floor.

"Ah, that looks like our transportation." Minerva smiled at Hagrid who had just entered the room. "Hagrid, we have a rather large snake that needs checking over. I fear it will have to stay with you until after the winter, if that is permissible."

Hagrid's face softened at the sight of the snake. "Who's a pretty boy then?"

"It's a girl," Harry enlightened him.

Hagrid was now even more delighted. "I'll 'ave to think of a name for 'er."

"I'll check to see if she's got one." Harry knelt down. "Hagrid wants to know if you have a name."

The snake answered negatively. "I do not."

"Is there anything you would like to be called?" Harry decided to give the snake the option before Hagrid saddled it with something like 'Roger'.

"There is not," the snake confirmed.

"What did she say, Harry?" Hagrid asked, completely unperturbed by Harry's ability; if Minerva wasn't bothered, then neither was he.

"That she doesn't have a name, and there's nothing she knows she wants to be called." Harry stood back up. "Is there a name you want to give her, Hagrid?"

"No, but perhaps you would like to name her, Harry," Hagrid suggested.

Harry checked with the big man. "Are you sure, Hagrid? She's going to be living with you."

"Course it is. She's still your snake." Hagrid held out his giant arm. "She can ride back to me hut on me if she wants to."

Harry again knelt down and informed the snake that Hagrid would take care of her, but that he would still visit her as much as he could, and that when he had found a suitable name he would drop by. He had just finished speaking when Gilderoy came back into the room. "Harry, old chap, some of your friends are here. They didn't want to leave until they knew you were safe."

"They can come in." Minerva gave permission for the students to re-enter the Great Hall.

George, Fred, Justin, Hermione and Luna walked in, Luna skipping up to Hagrid. "Can I touch the snake now?"

The snake hissed at Luna, making Luna rear back. Harry walked over to Hagrid and spoke to the snake. "She's my friend."

But when Luna again tried to approach the snake, it hissed at her once more. Hagrid gently stroked her head. "Perhaps she only likes men."

Hermione decided to keep her distance as she checked on the state of her friend. "Harry, are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Harry could see that Hermione was rather worried. "What's wrong?"

Hermione shared a brief worried look with the Headmistress, before responding, "You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?" Harry was completely lost.

"You were speaking Parseltongue," George blurted out.

"What?" Harry was still none-the-wiser.

"He means that you are able to speak to snakes, Mr. Potter." Minerva moved closer to Harry and the snake. Again the snake hissed a warning. "I don't think she likes me either."

"Sorry, Professor." Harry apologized for the snake, before returning to the subject of Parseltongue. "But I thought you had put some sort of spell on me."

"I didn't." Minerva's face was grave. "There is no known spell that can aid you to speak to snakes. It's something you can either do or you can't."

"Like being a Metamorphmagus?" Harry asked.

Minerva knew then that Tonks had shared her own innate talent. "Exactly."

Harry was thrilled. "That's wicked."

"It's actually a bad thing, Harry," Hermione interrupted Harry's moment of pleasure.

"How can being able to talk to snakes be bad?" Harry protested. "I bet lots of people can talk to snakes."

Minerva explained. "It's a very rare talent. In the last century, apart from you there has only been one well-known Parselmouth, which is the correct name for someone who can speak Parseltongue."

Harry had a sinking feeling he knew now why it was such a bad thing. "You-Know-Who?"

Minerva then confirmed Harry's feeling. "Yes, that's why Miss Granger said it was a bad thing."

"And the whole school knows I can speak Parseltongue." Harry finally understood the varying looks of horror and surprise. "This can't be good."

"I shouldn't worry too much about it, Mr. Potter," Minerva sympathized. "It will be a ten minute furor but then things will die down."

Unfortunately Minerva could not have been more wrong.

After being dismissed, Harry and Justin made their way back to the Hufflepuff common room together, Harry talking about his ability with his friend. "You don't seem bothered at what I can do."

"I think it's pretty cool you can speak to snakes." Justin actually felt a little envious of Harry's ability. "And I think it's ridiculous to be afraid of something like that."

"I have a feeling that you're probably one of the few people who feels like that." Harry stopped outside the door to the Hufflepuff common room. "Do you think everyone is going to ignore me?"

"There's only one way to find out." Justin pointed to the door handle. "Just open the door."

"Well, here goes." Harry opened the door to the Hufflepuff common room. What had been a hubbub of commotion and noise became a vacuum. Not even a whisper disturbed the silence. Harry's heart sank at the sight of a weeping Susan in Cedric Diggory's arms. Harry approached them. "Susan, I..."

Susan responded by burying her wet face in Cedric's chest and crying harder. Cedric gave Harry a consolatory look. "Leave it for tonight, Harry."

Harry was glad that at least one person could meet him eye to eye. "Thanks, Cedric."

He walked over to his girlfriend, who visibly recoiled. "Ginny, what's wrong or need I ask?"

Ginny was pale, although unlike Susan, she was not crying. "Being able to speak to snakes is evil, Harry. You're supposed to be good. You're the Boy Who Lived."

"I'm not evil," Harry said, reaching out to touch Ginny, who again recoiled. "But you don't believe that though, do you?"

"I heard you," Ginny whispered, her perfect image of Harry shattered. "You can talk to snakes, just like he can."

Justin placed a hand on a pale faced Harry's arm. "Harry, leave it until things have calmed down."

Harry gave Ginny one last dismal look, before he disconsolately made his way into their dormitory room to find Ernie was already there. Harry took one look at the boy's horrified face and started rummaging through his chest, pulling out a treasured possession. "I'll see you later, Justin."

"I'm coming with you." Justin gave Ernie a look of his own that spoke volumes, and then he followed his friend out of the bedroom.

Susan was still crying, and Ginny was still refusing to look at Harry as he made his way out of the room. Cedric, however, called out before Harry could leave, "It's curfew in less than an hour, Harry."

"Thanks, Cedric." Harry opened the door, and Justin followed him.

"So where are we going?" Justin fell in step with Harry.

"I don't know." But Harry obviously did, as he headed for the exit. "I need some fresh air."

"Then fresh air it is." Justin shivered in the cold night air, and cast a warming spell. "It's freezing, and this spell won't last long."

Even as dejected as he was, Harry realized that even with warming spells, they would be miserable outside. "Let's go to the Runes classroom."

The classroom in question was one of Harry's favorites. One wall was made up almost entirely of stained glass depicting images of time gone by, and there was a study corner where students were encouraged to sit down and talk out their problems. There were, of course, standard desks, but most students preferred the informal atmosphere afforded by the study corner and the plump, leather sofas that were placed there. And it was onto one of these sofas that Harry dropped. "What am I going to do?"

"Nothing," Justin said as he flopped down beside him. "It's not you who's got a problem with the Parseltongue thing."

"But what about Susan and Ginny?"

"Do you want me to answer honestly?" Justin asked his friend.

"Yes." Harry preferred to get the truth.

"I think they're being really stupid." Justin was pretty blunt about how he felt. "So you can speak to snakes. You're still the same person you were before they found that out."

"But Ginny has said she thinks I'm evil." Harry had to admit to himself that he was disappointed with how his girlfriend had reacted.

"Then as I said, she's an idiot," Justin responded as he defended Harry. "Neither Hermione nor Luna ran away. They were both more concerned about you than the snake thing. Luna even jumped up on the stage to try to help."

Harry experienced a small warmth inside when he thought about what Justin had said about his blonde friend. "She was amazing, and so was Ron; he even refused to leave me when McGonagall said he could go."

"And Ron and Luna are both pure-bloods," Justin reminded Harry, "and so they should have been more freaked out by what happened."

"Ginny's a pure-blood and she freaked out," Harry pointed out. "As did Susan, although I know she's not a pure-blood."

Justin offered up an excuse for Susan. "At least Susan had good reason to be scared. She lost her parents to You-Know-Who."

"And so did I," Harry argued, not as willing to be so forgiving. He sighed. "I would never have turned my back on either Susan or Ginny if it had been them."

"I know that, but they're not you," Justin said.

Harry tugged at a strand of his hair. "Justin, what if being able to speak Parseltongue means I'm evil?"

Justin snorted and gave a derisive laugh. "I can see it now. Baby Harry Potter makes a pact with the big bad Dark Lord. 'Excuse me, evil one, but before you try to kill me, just in case I survive, please would you first make it so that I can talk to snakes and be really evil as well?'"

Harry laughed at Justin's 'evil baby voice'. "I'm so glad that you're my friend."

"Likewise, Harry."

The two boys then spent some time talking, before Justin stood up and grabbed Harry's unused invisibility cloak from him. "Come on. I think we should get back."

Bolstered by Justin's words and his presence, Harry followed his friend back to the Hufflepuff common room. Susan was nowhere to be seen, but Cedric was there, and he came over. "Are you all right?"

"Could be better." Harry gave a small smile.

"I just wanted you to know that I'm here if you need anyone to talk to." Cedric liked the younger boy, and he thought that the talk that Harry might be the Heir just because he could speak Parseltongue was absolute hogwash. "And I don't believe you're the Heir."

"Heir?" Harry's face mirrored the confusion he was feeling. "What Heir?"

Cedric reminded Harry of what had been written on the wall on the second floor. "Because you can speak to snakes, some people are saying that you're the Heir of Slytherin and that you opened the Chamber of Secrets."

"That's just stupid." Harry was not happy. "But thanks for letting me know. I'm going to bed."

The next day when Harry tried to speak to Susan and Ginny, they both avoided him. "Well, it looks as though you're no longer alone in having no girlfriend, Justin."

"Sorry, mate." Justin patted Harry on the back. "Your girl problems will have to wait. It's getting late, and we'd better get to class."

Harry tried several times during the day to speak to both girls, failing every time. In the end he gave up and headed back into his dorm room. "Looks as though I was right about me being single. Ginny's avoiding me."

Justin was on Harry's side. "It's entirely her loss."

Harry smiled at his friend. "Thanks, Justin."

With both Ginny and Susan refusing to speak to Harry, it made things difficult for the little group of friends, with everyone except for the two girls accepting Harry's ability. Both Luna and Hermione had talked to the two girls, and Ginny had said that she couldn't deal with Harry's ability, and that she was sorry, but it was over. Susan had said that she needed some time, but to be honest the whole thing had freaked her out, and so, feeling uncomfortable with the others, Susan then began to drift towards Hannah Abbott, who had taken Susan's side, agreeing with her friend that Harry's ability was something more than a little unsettling.

After two weeks, it became apparent that the girls were no longer part of the group, and Harry had to accept the fact that, just like Justin, he was now single. He had to admit to himself that he was not too bothered, especially as none of his other friends were dating yet. But overnight the status quo was about to change.

Stepping back into Hogwarts after practice, Justin shook the snow off his quidditch cloak without looking. Hearing a giggling gasp he turned around. "Luna! I'm really sorry."

"I like the snow." And to prove it, Luna licked away a few of the snowflakes that had fallen from Justin's cloak onto her hand. "Particularly how it tastes."

Justin laughed at the happy smile Luna was displaying, and he decided that she looked rather pretty with snowflakes dotting her blonde hair, and he came to a decision. "Luna, would you like to take a walk outside?"

"I'd love to," Luna responded enthusiastically. "We might see snow fairies."

"We might," Justin responded, even though he had no idea what snow fairies were.

Harry was sitting reading when a somewhat bemused Justin came into the dormitory. "Are you all right?"

"I'm going out with Luna Lovegood," Justin said in a bemused voice as he sat down on the bed. "Well, I asked her out, and she kissed me, so I think I'm going out with her, even though she didn't say yes."

Harry shot upright. "You don't like Cho anymore?"

"Not exactly but I like Luna." Justin had gotten closer to the younger girl after Harry's incident with the snake, both wanting to defend their friend. "I think she's funny and really pretty."

Harry was really pleased for his friend. "At least one of us has a girlfriend now."

"Ginny might change her mind," Justin said as he pulled off his boots.

"It wouldn't matter if she did." Harry had thought long and hard about what he would do if Ginny did so. "I wouldn't go back out with her."

As much as he liked Ginny, Justin had also been disappointed by the girl's actions. "I'm sorry but I agree with you."

"Amelia wrote to me." Harry lifted up the letter the head of BritAD had sent to him, a letter that Harry had been more than stunned to receive. "She said she was sorry that she hadn't written sooner but she's been out of the country. And she said that she supports me. Aunt Molly, Charlie, and Remus also wrote to tell me that they're on my side, so why couldn't Ginny be?"

"I don't know and it's a shame that Ginny isn't more like the rest of her family," Justin remarked as he grabbed his washing kit.

"I wouldn't say the rest of them," Harry said. "Percy has already warned me off his sister."

"Percy's a jumped-up idiot," Justin said, having by now stripped down to his boxer shorts. "Sorry, but I need to take a shower. We can talk when I've finished."

"I need one as well." Harry had been putting it off, wanting to talk to his friend about the letters. "Did I tell you that Andy Tonks and Tonks also sent me letters?"

The two boys drifted into the showers together talking about the letters Harry had received. Elsewhere in the building, a delighted Luna had tracked down Hermione to the library. "Hello."

Hermione knew something was up the moment she laid eyes on her friend. "What's going on?"

"Justin kissed me." Luna giggled. "Well, I kissed him first but then he kissed me again and again and again." Luna spun around in a circle as she spoke.

Thoroughly distracted from her divination homework, Hermione put down her quill. "You're going out with Justin?"

Luna's head bobbed up and down in affirmation. "Yes, and he took me for a walk in the snow holding my hand. Then he asked me to be his girlfriend, and I kissed him. And did I tell you that he kissed me?"

Hermione had never seen Luna so rapt before, not even when she talking about Crumple Horned Snorkacks. "You really like him, don't you?"

"Yes," Luna sighed. "My first kiss was everything I thought it would be. Just like yours and Harry's."

"Shh," Hermione hissed at her friend, having shared what had happened on the train with Luna. "Someone might hear you."

"There's no-one here." Luna dropped her head into hands. "It was perfect, Hermione."

As the two girls talked about their first kisses, neither of them had any idea that someone was eavesdropping. Ginny Weasley had been behind the bookcase at the rear of the table at which Hermione was sitting and couldn't help overhearing the girls' conversation. Shocked that her former boyfriend had shared his first kiss with Hermione, Ginny waited a short time before heading out of the library, neither Luna nor Hermione spotting her. As she headed back to Hufflepuff, Ginny wondered if Harry had kissed Hermione when he had been going with her or if it had happened afterwards.

Next Chapter: Harry spends Christmas with the Weasleys; a death at Hogwarts causes problems for Harry.

Happy Thanksgiving to everyone as I doubt I'll be updating before then.

Chapter 29: A Gift of Justice

Harry made his way into the library, a smile letting those there know he had been successful. George nudged Hermione, who had her head in a book. "Someone looks happy."

Hermione glanced up at Harry. "So she liked the name?"

"She absolute loved it," Harry said as he sat down next to Luna and Justin. "She said it felt like a new skin to her."

Luna, who had helped Hermione and Harry find a name for the snake, gave a little shiver. "I like snakes but I don't like the idea of them shedding their skins." Then she smiled. "But I'm glad that Nagini is happy with her new name."

"She was." Harry decided not to tell Luna that he had helped to feed the snake, making Nagini even happier. "She thought that linking her name to the meaning of 'snake' was a great idea."

"I'm pleased to hear that Nagini liked the name we found for her but I really have to get on. I'm supposed to be going to Hogsmeade with Dean to help him choose some books in an hour, and I'd like to be finished before then." Hermione gave Harry an apologetic smile and settled back down to her reading.

Harry was rather dismayed, and he shot a worried glance at Hermione, who he knew would already be in a different world. "She works too hard."

"I've tried telling her that but she won't listen." Dean also glanced at the girl who had been helping him out in some of his classes. "Nor does she seem to take much notice of the world around her once she's studying. But at least I've managed to persuade her to come to Hogsmeade with me rather than staying in here."

As if to prove Harry's theory about being in a different world, Hermione didn't appear to have heard the discussion about her, and she carried on reading. Luna, on the other hand, thought her friend was getting rather thin, but she was not about to say that, having the feeling that despite her air of ignorance, Hermione was very much aware of what was being said around her. Instead she changed the subject and started to talk about exploding crickets.

The Burrow

Harry lay in his bed and looked at the ceiling, trying to pretend that he didn't know that Ron was watching him. However, after his friend sighed for the tenth time, Harry reluctantly asked, "Do I really have to get up?"

Now that he had finally acknowledged him, Ron got out of bed and stood over Harry. "She'll come round, Harry."

Harry disagreed. "I don't think she will, Ron, and I hate how horrible this is making things for everyone."

Ron sat down on the edge of Harry's bed. "Mum's already said that Ginny is in the wrong."

Harry sat up. "I know she's doing everything she can to change Ginny's mind, but I think I'm going to ask if I can go and stay with Remus."

Ron's face fell. "You can't go. Mum would be upset."

A knock at the door disturbed the two boys, and Molly looked around the door. "Are you two going to stay in bed all day?"

"Harry wants to go and stay with Remus because of Ginny," Ron blurted out in response to Molly's question.

Molly moved fully into the bedroom and shut the door behind her. "Harry, Ginny is behaving like a child, and I've told her that. And I don't want you anywhere but here with your family on Christmas Day."

Harry felt tears come to his eyes at Molly's words but he still shook his head. "It's making things too difficult, Aunt Molly. I'd like to write and ask Remus if I can stay with him."

Molly wished she could knock some sense into her daughter but she understood what Harry was trying to do. "I'd rather you were here, but I'll support you no matter what you want to do."

Harry slid out of bed and hugged Molly. "Thank you."

Molly hugged him just as hard back, before releasing him. "Now get dressed and come down for some breakfast. Ginny has gone into work with Arthur."

Harry was relieved to hear it. "What about Percy?"

"He's studying in his room," Molly said. "Now both of you, up and at it, and I'll save Hedwig a trip and put in a firecall to Remus."

The Next Day

Remus stepped through the fireplace and could feel the tension as soon as he did so. "Good morning."

Ginny stalked off as Remus straightened up and dusted off the ash from his floo journey. "Arthur, good to see you."

Arthur held out his hand. "You too, Remus. Do you want to stay for lunch?"

Remus could feel anxiety coming from Harry, and he therefore declined. "I think it would be better if I took Harry straight back with me."

Arthur ruffled Harry's hair. "I wish you'd reconsider."

Harry heard Ginny snort in the kitchen, and he shook his head. "I think it's better this way."

"Then I'll come over and see you on Christmas Day," Molly promised as she hugged Harry and kissed his cheek. "Do you want me to bring anything?"

"Ron," Harry said, hoping to see his friend.

"He can stay for a few nights if he wants to," Remus offered.

A despondent Ron's face lit up at Remus' response. "I'll bring your present over."

"Aunt Molly has yours already," Harry said and he shook hands with Ron. "See you then."

"See you," Ron said, thinking unkind things about his sister as he did so.

Remus held out his arm to Harry. "We'll apparate back."

A suffocating moment later, Harry was back in Remus' home. "Thanks for coming to get me. I just couldn't stay there."

"Molly explained," Remus told him, understanding.

Harry groaned as a tap sounded at the window. "I hope that's not for me. I've been getting hate mail ever since everyone found about the whole snake thing." When Remus opened his window, the owl flew to Harry, a bright red envelope affixed to its leg. "How the heck did it know I'd be here?"

Remus shrugged in response. "I have no idea but I'll deal with this."

Harry watched as Remus cast several spells, and the red envelope shot off the owl's leg and into a bubble where it exploded. Remus smiled at Harry. "I'll set up a sorting spell. I won't be able to stop all the hate mail getting through, but at least you won't have to deal with the Howlers."

Having had to deal with over thirty of them, Harry was rather relieved. "I thought they might have stopped by now."

"They'll stop eventually," Remus said as he took Harry's trunk and headed for the room that he now considered to be Harry's. "I'm taking us out to dinner tonight, so why don't you work on whatever homework you have to do before you return to school so that it doesn't get left until the last minute? I've got things I need to do in my study but Macclesby will fetch anything you need."

Harry suffered a pang of guilt. "I'm sorry if I'm messing things up for you."

Remus flicked his wand at Harry's trunk so that it would unpack itself. "Harry, you're not. Anything I had planned to do can wait. You come first."

At Remus' words, Harry felt even worse, aware from Remus' words that Remus must have had plans that he had messed up. "I can go back to Hogwarts."

Remus turned to face Harry. "Harry, you're staying with me. My girlfriend understood when I explained that I needed to take care of you."

"You were going out to dinner with her tonight, weren't you?" Harry guessed.

Not wanting to lie, Remus nodded. "I was but..."

Harry interrupted him. "Can't we all go out together?"

Remus smiled. "I'll firecall the restaurant and increase the booking, and then apparate to see Julianne. So stop feeling guilty."

"Only if you promise that you won't change what you had planned because of me," Harry said, not wanting to disrupt Remus' life.

"I promise," Remus said, but he would have done so for Harry if necessary. "But I've only been seeing her for two weeks, and I didn't have much planned with her except for dinner tonight."

Maxwell's Restaurant

Harry grinned as he spotted the girl with the Remus. "Hello, Auror Solace."

Julianne smiled back. "Hello, Trainee Potter."

Remus looked back and forth. "So I take it you two know each other?"

"Auror Solace taught my Charms class," Harry said, having half expected Remus to have known. "She and Auror Valeris were the ones who kept giving me merits."

"Because you earned them, Harry," Julianne said as she sat down. "And you can call me Julianne; Auror Solace is rather formal."

The meal went well until the subject of the reason behind Harry's stay with Remus came up. But even then, Julianne reached out to Harry, assuring him that she didn't care what he could do; she knew only too well that he was good person, and she told him that he'd always be welcome in her classroom. This cheered up Harry immensely, and he finally began to realize that despite the hate mail he had been receiving, not everyone thought too badly of him.

New Year's Eve

Once Ron had returned home after a few fun filled days together, Remus led Harry into a room in his house that Harry had never noticed before, and when Harry mentioned it, Remus explained, "This is my training room, and usually the entrance is hidden by a glamour."

Now Harry understood why he had never noticed it. "So we're going to do some training?"

"I thought you might like to do some fun stuff," Remus said in response. "Well, learning how to cast an Unforgivable isn't exactly fun but it'll be more interesting than our last session."

Having half expected another boring day of repetitive spell casting, Harry suddenly felt excited. "An Unforgivable?"

"I was only going to start by teaching you the Imperius curse, but if you're not comfortable that, then we'll do something else," Remus said, sticking to his promise not to try and force anything on Harry.

Despite his excitement, Harry still thought about it for a moment, before deciding that the curse was probably the most innocuous of the three Unforgivables, and he doubted Remus would do anything to him that would be horrible. "Okay then, I'll give it a go."

In response, Remus walked over to a wooden table that was set against the wall, and lifted up several sheets of parchment that he wanted Harry to review. "Before we start, you have to sign the waiver we mentioned, because, as you know, the Imperius Curse is a Dark Arts spell."

Harry spent the next twenty minutes going over the waiver with Remus before signing his name to him, his hand shaking as he did

so. Remus immediately set out to reassure him. "Harry, if at any time you want to stop, all you have to do is say so."

Harry just wanted to get on with it, and his response was rather brusque. "I know."

"Then we'd better begin by you experiencing how it feels," Remus said, and he took out his wand. "I promise this won't hurt and I won't do anything that you'd find uncomfortable or embarrassing."

"I'm ready then," Harry said.

Remus waited for Harry to move in front of him, before casting the spell. "Imperio."

In a fog, Harry could hear Remus telling him to sit down: Harry sat down. Then the feeling was over, and a somewhat disorientated Harry looked up, blinking rapidly as if he had just woken up. "That was weird."

"You'll get used to it, and we're going to do it again," Remus said as he lightly pulled Harry to his feet. "This time, however, I want you to try and fight the curse. Tell yourself you don't want to do what I'm telling you."

Harry readied himself, and once again he found himself in the fog, and as before, Remus told him to sit down. Harry began to try and fight as his knees started to bend, but despite his efforts he still ended up sitting down again but this time it took longer.

Remus was surprised but pleased. "That was good, Harry."

Harry was just as surprised by the praise. "But I sat down."

"I know but you didn't do it straightaway, and I really didn't expect you to be able to find the curse," Remus told him. "Now let's try it again."

After Harry succeeded on fighting off the curse on his seventh attempt, Remus put him through his paces three more times, to try and determine if it was a fluke or not: In the final test, Harry failed once, but succeeded twice and Remus then called a halt. "That's really good, Harry, but it's enough for today."

As Harry met Remus' gaze, he was surprised to spot a ring of black circling Remus' irises. "Your eyes look different."

"It's the side effect I told you about," Remus said. "If I continued to keep casting the curse, my eyes would eventually become totally black."

Harry shuddered, not entirely certain he was thrilled at his eyes changing color. "And that's going to happen to me?"

"I'm going to stop things before it does," Remus said, not wanting Harry to worry about it. "Now take out your secondary wand. It's your turn to try the spell on me, and I want you to do exactly as I did."

Harry's nerves returned full force as he aimed his wand at Remus. "Imperio."

Remus simply smiled at Harry and said gently, "Relax, Harry, and try again."

Harry tried four times and failed each time, his voice full of frustration as he snapped, "I can't do it, Remus."

"Let's try this from a different angle," Remus said, believing that Harry was throwing up a mental block. "Close your eyes."

Harry protested immediately. "Auror Valeris said to keep my eyes open when I'm casting a spell."

"Normally that it is good advice," Remus said, backing up Valeris' advice. "But just for the moment, I want you to close your eyes." When Harry did as he instructed, Remus continued, "Now think about Snape; think about the last detention you served with him."

Harry scowled as he thought about how many cauldrons Snape had had him clean. "Okay."

Remus smiled to himself as he felt Harry's anger, and he knew that Harry was ready. "Now open your eyes and cast the spell."

Harry eyes snapped open and he took aim at Remus. "Imperio. Sit down."

This time it was obvious that the spell had worked. But just as he was bending to sit down, Remus shook it off. "That was very good, Harry. Let's try it again."

Remus had Harry repeat the spell five more times, before calling a halt as he spotted the telltale black circle around Harry's irises. "That's enough."

Harry yawned. "Sorry but that was tiring."

"It will get easier," Remus promised. "Let's go get some lunch."

"Are we going to practice again afterwards?" Harry asked, this time having enjoyed himself.

Remus shook his head. "Not a Dark Arts spell, no. We can practice some dueling spells instead."

"But I did okay, didn't I?" Harry asked, as he was a little concerned about his performance.

"You had me sit down twice," Remus reminded him as they took their seats at the table where Macclesby had laid out lunch.

"But you didn't fight it as hard as you would normally, did you?" Harry asked, as he couldn't imagine an Unspeakable being so vulnerable.

Remus admitted that he hadn't. "I can easily throw off the Imperius curse if I concentrate. If I don't, then as you've seen, I'll follow whatever order I'm told to carry out."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Harry asked before biting into a salad sandwich.

"Because you wouldn't have tried as hard, and you'd have ended up failing," Remus said. "Now let's talk about what we're going to do this afternoon..."

Hogwarts Express

On the way back to school, Harry was joined in the compartment he was sharing with Ron and Neville by Justin and Luna, and Hermione and Dean. The twins had already disappeared to sit with Angelina and Katie, Lee, and Beth, Lee's girlfriend.

Once the usual discussions about what the children had done during the holiday had been covered, the talk turned to Harry's ability, something Harry was surprised about, particularly as Luna was smiling widely. "I found out some really important stuff about your ability, Harry." Harry half-expected Luna to bring up some strange animal and was a little taken aback when she instead held out a sheaf of parchment. "Daddy and I have spent time looking it up."

Harry immediately took the sheaf and began to look through it. A few moments later he looked up in astonishment. "Maximus Green was a Parselmouth?"

Hermione, like Harry, had covered him in history but his ability to speak to snakes had not been covered, and even Hermione had not unearthed it. "I knew he was an exceptional healer for his time, but not that he could speak to snakes."

Harry glanced back at the parchment. "It says here that he used snake venom he asked the snakes for in his potions to help people." He then glanced at the next name on the list and was about to make a comment, when the compartment door opened and a nervous looking Susan appeared. "Um, hello."

Luna gave Susan a somewhat reserved smile but she was the only one who did so. Unnerved by the cold looks she was receiving, Susan hopped from one foot to the other. "Can I speak to Harry?"

Harry put down the parchment, and rather bluntly asked, "What do you want?"

"Can I talk with you alone?" Susan asked.

"Okay." Harry got up and followed Susan out.

They were both surprised to find an empty compartment at the end of the carriage and Harry stood aside to let Susan go in, before

closing the door behind him. The door had barely clicked to when Susan blurted out, "Harry, I want to apologize for my behavior."

Harry turned around. "Why?"

Susan hadn't expected it to be easy but she persevered. "Because I was horribly wrong to do what I did. You were my friend and I let you down."

Harry didn't deny it. "Yes, you did."

Susan held out a box. "This is for you."

Harry shook his head. "I don't want it, Susan."

"I'm not trying to buy you or anything," Susan said hurriedly, not wanting Harry to get the wrong idea. "It's what's known as a gift of justice. Please accept it."

"I don't understand," Harry said, never having heard of a gift of justice.

"It's a gift of apology," Susan said. "When one family has insulted another, to apologize they often give a gift to do so." She held out the box. "Please, Harry, even if you don't ever speak to me again, I want you to accept these."

Harry somewhat reluctantly took the box and opened it. "Cufflinks?"

"They'll protect you against most poisons," Susan said, looking hopefully at Harry. "Please take them."

"You want me to have them even if I refuse to accept your apology?" Harry asked.

Susan nodded. "Yes."

Harry debated things, before asking a question. "Why did you change your mind about me?"

"I had a long talk with Aunt Amy," Susan said. "She told me that I couldn't transfer the blame to you about what happened to my family,

and that just because you spoke Parseltongue it didn't make you a different person or a bad one."

Harry found himself wondering something. "Have you ever heard of Charity Weaver?"

Susan frowned but shook her head. "No."

"How about Maximus Green?"

"Wasn't he a healer or something," Susan said, recalling the name from history.

"So you don't know anything about them?" Harry asked.

Susan shook her head. "No, why is it important?"

"I thought that maybe your aunt had told you about them and that's why you changed your mind," Harry said.

"I changed my mind because it was the right thing to do," Susan responded. "But it was mostly because of what Aunt Amy talked to me about." She threw Harry a confused look. "Why?"

"Because they're the names of people who could speak Parseltongue; people who were considered good witches and wizards," Harry said.

Now Susan understood. "You thought I'd changed my mind because of something I'd been told."

"Yeah," Harry said, and he looked down at the cufflinks. "Thank you for these."

Susan tried to hold back her tears as she presumed that Harry was about to refuse her apology. "You're welcome, and thank you for at least letting me try. And again, I'm sorry."

Harry decided that Susan was genuinely remorseful. "Susan, I accept your apology but it's going to take time before we can be friends again."

Susan was unsurprised to hear this. "I understand, and I'll see you in school."

When Harry returned to the compartment, all eyes looked up. "She apologized, and we're going to try and be friends again."

"What have you got in your hand?" Justin asked, spotting the box.

Harry showed them. "Susan called it a gift of justice."

"She must really feel bad then," Luna remarked.

Harry frowned. "What do you mean?"

"If you give someone a gift of justice, then your entire family are obliged to the person you give the gift to," Luna explained. "If you were to go to Susan's aunt and ask her to die for you, then she would have to."

Harry was horrified. "Susan never told me. She just said that it was to make up for what she had done." He glanced at Luna. "Can I give them back?"

Luna shook her head. "Once you accept the gift, then the whole family are bound magically."

Harry slumped into his chair. "I don't know what Amelia is going to say."

"As head of the Bones family, she would have to give her permission for Susan to do this," Luna said. "She already knows, Harry."

Stunned, Harry couldn't stop staring at the cufflinks. "There must be something I can do."

Luna told him otherwise. "Not unless, say, Susan was to save your life. Then you can offer to cancel the bond, but you can never give back the cufflinks."

During the remaining trip back to Hogwarts, Harry found himself thinking over what Susan had done, but even so, he still couldn't just

forgive her outright, and decided that he would have to simply see how things went between the two of them.

Two weeks later

Less than two weeks after returning, Harry found himself in yet another argument with Ginny. Since returning, she had either spent her time ignoring him, arguing with him, or making digs at him. Fed up with her, Harry marched into his dorm room, opened up his drawer, took out the research that Luna had done, and then returned to thrust it at Ginny. "See, I'm not evil, Ginny."

"I didn't say you were." Ginny, however, was unable to meet Harry's eyes, and although she took the list from Harry, she didn't look at it.

"You said I might be Slytherin's Heir, which is enough in itself," Harry reminded her. "And you won't even look at this."

"I don't see why I should." Ginny finally looked up at Harry. "It gives me the creeps to know that you can talk to snakes. He can talk to snakes."

Harry gave up. "Just forget it. If you think I'm evil, then I must be evil."

"I didn't say that." Ginny's voice rose.

"But you think I'm the Heir, don't you?" Harry bit out, feeling as though he was going round in circles.

"Yes," Ginny answered honestly.

"And so do you think I killed Filch's cat?" Harry challenged.

"Yes," Ginny admitted. "You didn't like it."

"Nobody did," Harry snapped, starting to become more than a little frustrated.

"So you're not sorry it's dead, are you?" Ginny's voice rose again.

"No, I'm not." Harry had hated the mangy looking thing. "But I didn't kill it."

Meredith, who had caught some of the conversation walked over. "Ginny, I think you should back off. I believe Harry."

Ginny shoved the lists back at Harry, and then walked away to sit by the fire.

About to return to his room, Harry experienced a small twinge of guilt at Meredith's surprising defense of him, and he grabbed Meredith's arm before she too could walk away. "Meredith, I have something to tell you."

"What is it?" Meredith asked curiously, wondering if Harry was going to show her what he had tried to show Ginny.

He didn't. Instead he owned up to the horrible thoughts that had gone through his mind when he had found out about Meredith making the team. "I hated you when I heard that you had won my spot as seeker. I kept imagining how many different ways you could be hurt so that I could maybe have a chance of getting back on the team. I'm sorry."

"Harry, you were upset." Meredith didn't take Harry's words to heart, but she did wonder, "Do you still feel that way?"

"If I could kill you and take over your position I would," Harry teased, a big smile on his face, not realizing that Ginny was listening carefully to the conversation.

Meredith, whose back was turned so that she couldn't see Ginny's face, joined in with the joke. "So if they find my body one day, they'll know who to blame."

"Yeah, me the big bad Heir." Harry grinned even wider, glad to have gotten something that had been bothering him off his chest. "It's getting late. I'd better get to bed."

"Thanks for being so honest." Meredith gave Harry a brief smile to show that there were no hard feelings before he walked off. She then went to join Ginny, who pointedly turned her back on her friend. "Ginny, you can't honestly still think he's evil."

"But he is, and why are you sticking up for him?" Ginny asked, more than a little confused at her friend's actions. "You're supposed to be my friend."

"I am but that doesn't mean I have to hate Harry," Meredith responded.

"Just be careful," Ginny warned her friend. "I just know he's not safe."

As the two girls headed for bed, neither knew that Ginny would recall her words to Meredith just a short time later.

Harry had been having a fun time running interference for Justin, who had been practicing catching the snitch. He hadn't felt this good for a long time, and smiling, he, Justin, and Luna, who hadn't wanted to be parted from her boyfriend, all went back to school after they had finished.

Things deteriorated though from the moment he and Justin stepped inside the Hufflepuff common room to find Ginny, Susan and quite a few other girls in tears. "What's going on?"

Ginny, who had tears running down her cheeks, got to her feet. "As if you didn't know, Potter."

"Know what?" Harry was totally at a loss to why he was being attacked.

"Meredith is dead," Ginny ground out. "She's dead, and I know you did it."

Next Chapter: Justin defends Harry; the creature strikes again; Harry has a surprise visitor.

Chapter 30: End of a Friendship

With so many accusing faces surrounding him, Harry took a step backwards in shock. "You think I killed Meredith?"

"Well, who else would have done it?" Ginny snapped.

"Why would I kill her?" Harry's voice was shaking as he asked; he was pretty upset himself by the news.

Ginny had the perfect response. "You were jealous because she was made seeker, and so you used the creature to get back at her. You admitted you were the Heir. I heard you and Meredith talking."

Harry remembered what he had said to Meredith a few days previously. "I was joking."

"Well, it didn't sound like a joke to me," Ginny snarled. "You said you would kill her, and you did it just so that you could get back on the quidditch team."

"This is ridiculous," Justin barked out. "I've been with Harry all day."

"Then perhaps you're in on it," the girl sobbed. "Perhaps you both killed her."

One of the current seventh year prefects, James Marsters, decided that things had gone far enough. "That's enough, Ginny. Harry is one of us, and you're attacking him."

"He's the Heir," Ginny was now shrieking, "and he killed Merry."

Harry couldn't take hearing his former girlfriend attack him like that, and so he turned on his heel and hurried out of the room. He was upset when Justin didn't follow, unaware that Justin had stayed to defend him. Justin turned on the room. "You all make me sick. I admit that Harry was upset when Meredith made the team. But Harry liked Meredith. He would never have hurt her."

Ginny exploded. "He bloody well admitted to being the Heir to Meredith the other night. Susan was in the room as well." She turned to Susan. "Tell him."

"Susan?" Justin questioned the redheaded girl.

"He was joking," Susan said, immediately backing up what Harry had said.

Ginny refused to listen. "I know Potter killed Merry. How can you defend him?"

"Because I trust him, because he's my friend, and because he's a Hufflepuff." Justin didn't raise his voice as he listed the reasons why he didn't believe Ginny's accusation. When no-one else defended Harry, Justin looked around in disgust. "Not that being a Hufflepuff counts for much right now. We're supposed to be the house that's loyal. What a joke! Right now I'd rather be in Slytherin." Several horrified gasps echoed in the room, and Justin backed up his announcement. "Yes, you heard me right, Slytherin! Because at least they would rally around their own, no matter what. You're all a bunch of hypocrites."

"Not all of us." Cedric stepped out from the dormitories, having caught the gist of what was going on. "I believe in Harry."

"As do I," James Marsters said, backing Harry. Several others also stepped forward, soon leaving a house divided.

"But not enough of you." Justin shook his head in abhorrence. "I'm going after my friend."

"I'll go with you." Cedric hurried out with Justin, Susan also following the two boys out. "Do you know where he's gone?"

"I think so." Justin headed for the Runes classroom but he and Cedric didn't get there, for Harry, together with the Headmistress and Amelia Bones were coming towards them.

Susan paled. "Aunt Amy, Harry's done nothing wrong."

Justin also said as much. "She's right. He had nothing to do with Meredith's death. He's been with me all day long."

Amelia smiled at Susan, before turning her attention to Justin. "I know he didn't have anything to do with it, Mr...?"

"Justin Finch-Fletchley," Justin said, providing the requisite information. "So if you know that, then why is he with you?"

"Because we're on our way back to Hufflepuff to make an announcement, Mr. Finch-Fletchley. So if you, Miss Bones, and Mr. Diggory would care to join us, I'd appreciate it." Amelia held out her hand indicating that the trio should lead the way.

Cedric ignored the hand and moved to stand next to Harry, squeezing his shoulder. "I believe you."

Harry smiled at his former teammate. "Thanks."

Susan moved to stand by Harry and slipped her hand into his. "As do I."

Harry tightened his grip on Susan's hand, silently signaling that they were once again friends. Susan gave him a joyful but tear filled glance, and together the group then headed back to Hufflepuff.

No-one said anything during the walk back, and again, when Harry entered Hufflepuff, you could have heard a pin drop.

Amelia moved to face everyone. "I have an announcement to make regarding Miss Harker."

"Potter did it." Ginny was still rather distressed, and she pointed at Harry. "You've come to arrest him, haven't you?"

"I have not." Amelia's voice became firm but was also full of compassion. "I understand that you're grieving right now, Miss Weasley, and that you want someone to blame, but Mr. Potter is innocent."

Ginny went white, but she said nothing, and Amelia continued talking. "Meredith Harker's death was from natural causes; her heart simply stopped."

Ginny found her voice again at the news and shook her head in disbelief. "No! That can't be right. He did it."

Normally Amelia would have kept information about a death private, but in this case it could only be beneficial to release the truth. "I've

checked Miss Harker over myself. There were absolutely no traces of any type of magical residue on her, apart from what I'd expect to find during a normal school day. Also, no defensive spells had been cast by her."

"She probably didn't have time to defend herself." Ginny's teeth were chattering as she responded.

"Miss Harker wouldn't have known that she had to defend himself against anything, and especially not against Mr. Potter," Amelia said softly. "Miss Harker had a heart attack. It's unusual for a witch I grant you, but her heart simply gave out."

Ginny still refused to accept Amelia's explanation. "But the creature that is in the Chamber; I know Potter released it to kill Merry. Potter said he was the Heir and wanted to kill her."

Amelia turned to Harry. "Harry?"

Harry explained about the conversation he had had with Meredith, and why he had had it. "I felt awful about thinking such mean things about Meredith, and I just wanted to come clean. The stuff about the Heir was simply something to clear the air. Meredith knew it was just a joke."

Ginny violently shook her head. "No, he's lying!"

Since she had been there, Susan turned to her aunt and explained what she had overheard. "Harry did say he was the big bad Heir, and that if he could kill Meredith and take over her position he would. But, Aunt Amy, he was joking."

"She's wrong." Ginny began to get hysterical again. "You have to know it's the same thing that got out before and killed a pupil, and he let it out."

Minerva took over, and like Amelia, she too made an unprecedented move in releasing information that would normally be kept quiet. "The girl who died the last time when the Chamber was believed to have been opened didn't die from a heart attack. In fact she's been questioned but remembers little that can help us."

Cedric murmured something under his breath, and because he was right and she didn't want people to twist things, Minerva nodded and explained more. "That is correct, Mr. Diggory. Moaning Myrtle, as she is currently known, was once a Ravenclaw pupil named Myrtle Seaton, and it is she who died at the hands of the creature from the Chamber." Minerva hesitated before making an apology. "I'm sorry, Mr. Marsters, to bring this up but it is important."

James Marsters, who was actually a distant relative of Myrtle, nodded his approval. "It's all right, Professor."

"Thank you." Minerva then continued. "We know that Miss Harker's death was entirely accidental because Myrtle Seaton's body was torn apart and her heart removed. Miss Harker's heart simply stopped beating."

Hands flew to mouths and tears filled eyes again at Minerva's announcement. It was too much for Ginny, and she began to sob heavily, collapsing onto the floor. Minerva walked over to her and knelt down, placing a hand on her shoulder, "I think it best if you go along to the hospital wing, Miss Weasley." Minerva then rose up and turned to Joyce Kim, the other seventh year prefect. "Would you please escort her out?"

Joyce, together with James, each looped an arm around the distraught girl, and led her out of the common room.

Amelia again took over. "I understand that you all want someone to blame, but believe me there is no-one to apportion any blame upon, especially not on Mr. Potter, and we expect you to treat him accordingly."

On that note, Amelia and Minerva exited the common room. They still had a lot to do. Meredith's parents, who had been informed of her death, were due to arrive at any moment, and Amelia knew them well, Meredith's mother being an Auror under her command, so she was going to sit in with Minerva.

No-one would look at Harry after the two left. Cedric gave Harry's shoulder one final squeeze before Harry walked back into his dormitory where Justin followed him. "It will die down, Harry."

"Not quickly enough." Harry felt exhausted, and he had done absolutely nothing wrong. "I just want it to end."

"I'm sure it will." Justin commiserated with Harry. "And things will get better."

A few weeks later

Harry left Pomona Sprout's office with Cedric and Justin feeling more than a little torn. Pomona had just offered to let Harry back on the quidditch team as a reserve now that Meredith was dead but he was not exactly convinced that it was a good idea. "I don't know, Cedric. I really need to think about this. Everyone's going to think that I killed Meredith after all if they hear that I'm back on the team."

"Harry, we need you," Cedric pleaded with the younger boy, whom he had come to consider a friend.

Justin also joined in with Cedric's begging. "He's right. Cedric can't play chaser and reserve seeker, so we need a decent reserve just in case I can't play, and we both know that it should be you in my spot anyway. Please, Harry, do it for me."

Harry caved in the face of his friends' pleading. "Okay, but I don't want anyone to know until the next game."

Cedric punched Harry lightly in the arm. "I knew you'd change your mind. But I'll have to tell the team."

"Nobody else though," Harry cautioned.

"I promise it will remain within the team," a delighted Cedric responded. "Let's go get some practice."

An hour later the three boys walked into the Hufflepuff common room to discover Susan weeping in Hannah's arms, and Harry's heart sank. Justin stepped forward. "What's going on?"

"Oh, Justin." Susan gently tugged away from her friend. "It's Luna."

"What's happened to her?" Harry broke in before Justin could ask.

"Colin Creevey found her outside the library," Susan wept. "She's been attacked."

"By who?" Harry's heart was now beating quickly.

"Justin!"

Justin turned around to see Pomona Sprout. "Susan just told us about Luna, Professor."

"Come with me," Pomona said, and she indicated towards the door that led to the bedrooms.

Cedric, Harry and Justin all followed their head of house into the third years' dormitory, Harry not about to let his friend deal with this alone, and Cedric following because he wanted to assure his head of house that Harry had had nothing to do with it.

His legs shaking, Justin sat down on the bed. "What's happened?"

"Miss Lovegood will be all right," was the first thing out of the teacher's mouth.

All three boys let out a sigh of relief, Harry looking pointedly at his teacher. "So who attacked her?"

"We don't know, but we believe it might be the creature from the Chamber, as this has happened before," Pomona said gently. "You see she's been petrified, and not attacked physically."

"Petrified?" Cedric asked in confusion. "What exactly do you mean?"

"It's as if she's a stone statue," Pomona explained. "She can't hear, see, or feel anything, and she will be like that for some time to come. We've had her moved to the hospital wing, and Professor Flitwick has informed her father."

"Why hasn't she been cured?" Justin thought it rather odd that Madam Pomfrey couldn't help his girlfriend.

"The cure is derived from Mandrakes, and they have to be grown." Pomona had some growing in one of the greenhouses. "A batch will be ready by June 30th."

"You do know that Harry had nothing to do with this, don't you?" Cedric asked, interrupting his head of house's explanation. "He was practicing with me and Justin."

"I'm well aware of Harry's innocence in this matter," Pomona assured Cedric, before she turned to Justin and Harry. "Would you two like to see Miss Lovegood?"

"We would." Harry stood up, gave Justin an encouraging smile, and followed the teacher out, Susan also being invited to join them.

When the trio returned, it was obvious to both of them that Ginny had been waiting for them. "Harry, I'm so very sorry about Luna. Can we possibly talk?"

Upset over Luna, Justin immediately jumped in before Harry could respond. "You've got a nerve. You bloody well accused Harry..."

"Justin, it's all right." Harry stemmed the flow of angry words, placing a hand on Justin's arm.

"So can we talk?" Ginny asked hopefully.

"I suppose so," Harry said, wanting to put this whole horrible time behind him, and there was the only one way he knew he could start to do that.

Harry followed Ginny out of the common room. Neither of them said anything until they reached the Runes classroom that Harry favored, and once inside, he turned to face Ginny. "So what do you want to talk about?"

Ginny's stomach lurched nervously at Harry's hard voice. "I know now that you can't be the Heir."

Harry's face didn't reveal that he was feeling more than a little disgusted at Ginny. He suspected that she was only willing to talk to him because one of his closest friends had been attacked, and there was no way he would have ever harmed Luna. He put his suspicions

to the test. "And how do you know that? I'm supposed to be the nasty big bad, Ginny, in case you've forgotten, and capable of anything, including attacking Luna."

Harry's sarcastic response only made Ginny more nervous as she confirmed Harry's suspicions that she had changed her opinion because of Luna's attack. "I know that you would never hurt Luna, and I'm sorry, Harry, I should have believed in you."

"You should have," Harry agreed, not giving Ginny any quarter. "But you didn't."

"I made a mistake, Harry." Ginny couldn't stop her voice from trembling as she responded. "Do you think we can make things like they were before?"

Ginny had hurt Harry a great deal, and his response towards her was therefore rather frosty. "Exactly what do you mean?"

"I'd like for us to be friends again," Ginny said, meeting Harry's eyes, a look for understanding on her face. "Please."

Well aware of what had driven Ginny from him in the first place, he brought this up. "How can we be friends again? Even though you know I'm not the Heir now, I still speak Parseltongue. I thought that made me evil. I overheard you telling Meredith that I was before I left the room."

Ginny felt embarrassed. "I'm sorry. It's just that talking to snakes gives me the creeps because he can do it."

"I can still talk to snakes, Ginny, so how do you know I won't turn out to be like Voldemort?" Harry challenged, taking pleasure from Ginny's wince as he said 'Voldemort'.

Ginny took a step backwards at the menace in Harry's voice, before she realized that Harry was testing her. "I just know you won't, and I still want to be your friend." Ginny lowered her head when she next spoke. "Please, Harry, it would mean a lot to be your friend again."

Harry shook his head. "I can't, Ginny. I thought you trusted me, but you ran off when I spoke to that snake. And you accused me of

killing that damned cat, to say nothing of the fact that you thought I killed Meredith as well."

"I was afraid and confused." Ginny reached out to touch Harry but he stepped away from her. "I didn't really think you had killed Meredith but I was scared by what you could do."

Harry let his earlier disgust at Ginny show on his face as he called her on her statement. "Don't lie, Ginny. I know you thought I'd killed her. You more or less demanded that Amelia arrest me!"

"I only said it because I was afraid you had become like him," Ginny said, tears starting to flow when she realized that Harry was standing firm.

"So all of a sudden I'm not going to be?" Harry was not making it easy on Ginny.

"No." Ginny shook her head. "Please, Harry."

"But I can't trust you, Ginny," Harry said in a sad voice. "When Nagini wrapped herself around me, you left me to face her on my own."

"I should have stayed but I was frightened, Harry," Ginny said, continuing to cry.

"So was I, and I should imagine that Ron was as well." Harry mentioned the Weasley who had stood by him. "But he refused to leave me, even when McGonagall said he could go. Where were you, Ginny?"

Ginny started to cry harder. "I'm so sorry, Harry. I was afraid and I made a mistake. Please forgive me."

For once, Harry wasn't swayed by a girl's tears. Ginny had hurt him so badly that he was literally immune to her distress. "Right now, Ginny, I can't. You accused me of being in league with Voldemort, you made it impossible for me to stay at the Burrow over the holidays, and worst of all you made your parents feel awful by trying to make them choose between us. I know you asked them to send me away."

"Who told you?" Ginny asked, anger marring her features.

"Does it matter?" Harry asked, not telling her that it had been Ron who had told him.

Ginny suspected it had been her youngest brother, but since George, as well as her parents, had been annoyed by her behavior during the holidays, she couldn't be sure. "I suppose not." She tried another tack, not bothering to wipe away her tears as she did. "Harry, don't you think it would be better if we could be friends again because of my family? Mum would be..."

Harry interrupted her. "I've already said I can't, Ginny. I tried to show you after Christmas that not all Parselmouths were evil, but you refused to listen to me. A true friend would have listened, but we're not friends, Ginny, and we never will be."

Finally having to face up to the fact that Harry was not going to change his mind, Ginny started to cry harder and fled from the room.

Hearing the retreating footfalls, Harry closed and locked the door, before making his way to a sofa and dropping down onto it.

Minerva and Pomona heaved a sigh of relief when they opened the door to the Runes classroom and spotted Harry asleep on a sofa. A misery-filled Ginny had said she had left him there, and Justin had confirmed that Harry liked to go there to think. "I think this Parseltongue business, Meredith's death, and now the attack on Miss Lovegood, have all been too much for him. I'll take him back to my rooms."

Pomona disagreed with Minerva's decision. "I think it might be better if I was to watch over him."

Minerva thought it over, before agreeing. "Very well."

Pomona knelt down beside Harry before changing her mind about waking him. Instead she cast a spell that would make him sleep even more deeply, and then she cast a second spell intending to levitate him to her rooms. Minerva interrupted her. "I'll apparate you both. It will save any awkward questions."

The room became empty as all three vanished.

Harry woke up, and for a moment he didn't know where he was. Then he realized, and he spoke aloud to himself. "How did I get here?"

Having set up wards to alert her when Harry awoke, a few moments after Harry asked himself the question, Pomona tapped on the door and poked her head around, asking, "Can I come in?"

"Am I in trouble?" Harry blurted out, wondering if he had been expelled for being out after curfew.

"No, Harry, you're not but you did give us a scare yesterday." Pomona placed a tray of food that had a warming charm over it on Harry's lap. "Normally I'd expect you to brush your teeth first but..."

Harry's cheeks turned pink. "I, um, need the bathroom."

Pomona removed the tray so that Harry could get up. "Then off you go, but you're returning here. It's the second door up the corridor."

Harry used the bathroom and brushed his teeth before returning. "I've got to get into bed?"

"Yes." Pomona's voice was quite firm. "I spoke to your classmates before bringing you back here, and Justin told me that you haven't been sleeping well. Susan also said that you've also had a poor appetite, so I want you to eat as much as you can, and then sleep until dinner."

"What about lunch?" Harry speared a sausage with his fork.

"It's one o'clock in the afternoon, Harry." Pomona could see that she had shocked Harry. "You needed the sleep, Harry."

"I must have done." Harry's stomach growled at him, reminding him to place the sausage in his mouth.

As he chewed, Pomona decided to see if Harry wanted to open up to her. "Is there anything you wish to talk about, Harry?"

Harry wondered if his head of house knew more about the Chamber than Lockhart seemed to. "Professor, do you know what attacked Luna?"

"No, Harry, I don't know as, just like the other teachers, I have no idea what is in the Chamber," Pomona answered. "But as you know, the Chamber was believed to have been opened almost 50 years ago with devastating consequences."

"Lockhart told us that the Chamber had been opened and someone had died but not exactly what had happened." Harry mentioned the loose-lipped teacher, before going on. "It was the Headmistress who told us about Myrtle Seaton. Didn't they ever find out what killed her?"

Pomona shook her head. "No, they didn't. A student was accused of harboring the monster that set up the attack."

"What happened to him?" Harry asked.

"He went to Azkaban for a while but he was released and found a job." Pomona smiled at Harry. "A job he's thankfully still in to this day."

Harry knew from her face that Pomona wouldn't tell him who it was, and so he didn't ask. His thoughts were refocused as Pomona asked about what had gone on between him and Ginny. Harry looked down for a moment before looking back up. "She wanted me to forgive her and to be her friend again, but I couldn't. I don't think I even like her anymore."

Pomona had also talked to a distraught Ginny, and she relayed what she knew to Harry. "I know Ginny was very silly in listening to her fears, but she has always worshipped you from what I can gather from talking to her. When she found out about your abilities, your image became tarnished and she couldn't deal with it."

"Do you think I should forgive her?" Harry asked, interested to get his teacher's opinion.

"Only when, and if, you're ready to do so," Pomona said, not willing to try to force Harry to do something he was far from ready for. "Harry, I know how hurt you've been over Ginny's reaction, and I

would likely have reacted in a similar fashion to you if I had been in your shoes."

Harry sighed heavily. "I don't think I can ever be friends with her again, and I'm not sure I can forgive her."

Pomona patted his hand. "Nobody expects you to, Harry." She took the tray away, Harry having placed his knife and fork across the plate. "Now get some sleep and I'll be up later with dinner."

Harry didn't think he'd be able to sleep as his mind was in turmoil but just minutes after Pomona closed the bedroom door, he was asleep.

As agreed with Minerva, Pomona kept Harry with her for the weekend, before returning him to Hufflepuff on Sunday evening. When Harry reached the Hufflepuff common room, he went looking for Justin and Susan, but he was unable to find them and was told by a second year to look in the dormitory for Justin. Justin wasn't there, but there was a big box of chocolate frogs and a card on Harry's bed. Harry opened the card up.

'Dear Harry

We're very sorry that we didn't believe you, and we don't blame you for what happened to Meredith. We're also sorry for what happened to Luna. Justin was right. We were worse than Slytherin. We hope that you can forgive us.'

The card had been signed by everyone in Hufflepuff except for Ginny, and Harry could feel tears welling up at what his friend had done. He span around at a noise and found Justin standing there. "You told the whole of Hufflepuff that they were worse than Slytherin?"

"Yes, that night when Meredith died. They deserved it." Justin glanced behind him. "Harry, Ginny is waiting outside. Can she come in?"

Harry was stunned to hear of his surprise visitor especially after the last discussion they had had, but given the talks he and Pomona had had over the weekend, he nodded. "Sure."

"I'll let her in and go." Justin went to head to open the door.

"I'd rather you stayed." Harry had no intention of being alone with the girl.

Justin therefore opened the door, and stood aside to let the waiting girl in. "Come in."

At Justin's bidding, Ginny immediately walked into the room and up to Harry, before holding out a wrapped gift. "This is for you, Harry."

Harry took it gingerly. "What is it?"

"An apology." Ginny tapped the box. "Open it. I promise there's nothing bad in there."

Harry opened it up to find a well-worn quidditch cloak. "Didn't Charlie give you this?"

Ginny nodded. "Yes."

Harry ran a finger over the now fraying material. "So why are you're giving it to me? You can't buy my friendship, Ginny."

Ginny's face dropped, having pondered over her problem all weekend. "I hoped that you might at least consider being my friend again. You gave Susan another chance."

Harry reminded her that he also done for the same for her. "And as I told you on Friday, I tried to give you a second chance after Christmas, and you turned me down."

"I was angry and upset about the whole Parselmouth thing," Ginny countered, before revealing something she had not thought about on Friday. "And I thought you had cheated on me."

"What?"

Ginny could see that Harry was confused. "I overheard Luna and Hermione talking in the library when Hermione first started going out with Dean Thomas, and they were talking about you and Hermione kissing for the first time."

Harry went red, more than a little embarrassed. "It was one kiss, and it was on the train on the way back to school. It was an accident and I even told Hermione when it happened that I liked you back then."

Ginny noticed the past tense. "You don't like me anymore though, do you?"

Harry was well aware his answer was going to hurt. "No, Ginny, I don't. You really hurt me, and I don't think I can ever forgive you. But..."

Ginny's head shot up, her face hopeful. "Yes?"

Harry brought her back down to Earth. "Look, Ginny, I'll be honest. I'm never going to be your friend again but for your parents' sake, I am willing to be polite and talk to you if I have to."

Ginny began to cry harder. "But..."

"Ginny, don't push it," Harry said, not wanting to listen to Ginny's pleas. "Let's just leave it at we'll be polite." He held out the cloak. "And I'm sorry, but I can't take this."

Ginny grabbed the cloak and ran.

Justin was worried by how pale Harry had gone. "Are you okay?"

Harry flopped down onto his bed. "That was horrible. I told her how I felt on Friday and she still keeps pushing. I know she would never have wanted to be friends again if it hadn't been for Luna's accident. And, as much as I love her parents, I don't like Ginny at all, and my offer to be polite was made purely because of them, and because of a letter that Aunt Molly and Uncle Arthur sent to me."

"What did they say?"

"Aunt Molly said that I'm always welcome and she understands," Harry said, smiling as he thought about the warm letter he had received. "Uncle Arthur said the same thing, but he did say that he's disappointed that Ginny and I can't be friends again, which is another reason why I made the offer to be polite."

"Do you think she'll behave?"

"Do you?"

Justin was well aware that Harry put great stock in his opinion, mostly because Justin was always honest. "Yes, but only on the surface. Ginny strikes me as a hell hath no fury type of girl, so watch your back. Either way, I'm here for you."

"Likewise, although I doubt Ginny will be after your blood." Harry shook himself and rolled his eyes. "A perfect end to a perfect weekend, I don't think."

"And just think we've got potions in the morning."

Harry groaned and dropped onto the bed, burying his face in his pillow as he let out a mock scream.

Justin laughed and headed towards the showers to get ready for bed.

Next Chapter: Harry discovers who originally was supposed to have opened the Chamber.

I will try and update once or twice a week as I have quite a bit of this revised now.

Chapter 31: Mandrakes

George sighed heavily. "It's not the same without Luna."

Katie scowled at her boyfriend, the two of them having argued more than once about George's extracurricular activities. "You mean it's not the same without Luna and her weird spells."

George scowled back. "You weren't complaining when I used one of those spells to help with your brother's birthday party."

Before the couple got into a full-blown argument, Fred decided to move the conversation along. "Why does it take so long for Mandrakes to mature?"

Harry scrunched up his face as he tried to remember what he had read about the Mandrakes. "I can't remember what we did on Mandrakes."

Neville hurried to answer about something he knew all about, feeling a sense of satisfaction that he finally had gotten one up on Harry. "I know. Mandrakes have to be grown in a particular environment, and they're really hard to bring to maturity. They need warm soil, regular feeding, and music. They also don't like climates that are too hot or too cold. And because they are a difficult plant to rear, their supply is limited, and Professor Sprout is one of the few people who has continual success in rearing them." Now Neville imitated Harry's expression of a few moments earlier and scrunched up his forehead as he tried to remember what else he knew, and then he smiled as he remembered. "And, no matter when or where they're grown, the first crop matures on the 31st of June and the later one on the 30th of August."

Harry then sort of remembered what he had covered in class but he still found himself having to ask, "Why not during the winter?"

"It's too cold for them," Hermione said, being just as knowledgeable as Neville. "They hibernate and stop growing."

"But Muggles have greenhouses," Justin reminded Hermione. "Can't they be grown in there?"

"Wizards have tried to grow them artificially but they die, although I'm not sure if they've tried Muggle greenhouses," Hermione responded. "No-one knows why but they have to grow naturally. Luna will have to wait until the crop that Professor Sprout is growing becomes mature enough to be harvested."

"At least she's going to be all right, as unlike that Myrtle girl, her heart wasn't ripped out," Neville said.

"Not helping, Nev," Ron scowled at his friend as Justin's face dropped.

Harry shivered as he recalled what the creature from the Chamber had done to Myrtle Seaton. "I wonder why she wasn't killed."

"Perhaps it isn't the same creature," Fred suggested.

"I've tried doing some research but I keep coming up blank." George sighed heavily yet again. "Perhaps Fred is right, and it isn't the same creature."

"Professor McGonagall said the same sort of thing happened when the Chamber was opened last time," Harry told him. "So I think it's the same creature hiding out somewhere. I just wish I knew where the Chamber was."

"Don't forget what Charlie said in his letter," Fred warned Harry. "No going after any big bad evil things."

"I'm not going after anything," Harry assured Fred. "I had enough scary adventures during my first year to last me a lifetime, thank you."

Angelina gave a shiver, and she snuggled closer to Fred. "It makes me feel cold talking about it. Can we talk about something else?"

No-one got a chance to answer as Susan and Hannah Abbott walked over to the group, who were all trying to get closer to the fire in the Great Hall, which at the weekends became a meeting area between meals. "Do you mind if we sit on the couch with you, Justin? Everywhere else is full."

"Feel free." Justin patted the seat beside him. "We were just talking about Luna, the Chamber, and what might be in there."

The subject matter made Hannah go red. "I'm sorry I thought it was you who opened it, Harry."

Harry had already told her that he would rather put it behind him but every time she saw him, she still apologized. "Hannah, please stop saying you're sorry."

Fred agreed. "Harry's right. You need to put it behind you."

"It's pretty hard when I remember that Luna Lovegood is up there frozen like that," Hannah said unhappily.

"You didn't do it, so stop feeling bad." Susan nudged her friend and sat down, turning her gaze to the fireplace.

Despite Susan's words, Hannah would not look at Harry, for even though Harry was once again pretty friendly towards Susan and the rest of Hufflepuff, bar Ginny, things between Hannah and Harry were still somewhat strained since Hannah truly believed that Harry still resented everyone. She would shortly discover that she was quite wrong, and that, apart from Ginny, Harry had forgiven the remainder of Hufflepuff.

31st March 1994

Harry struggled to contain his laughter. He had already been warned by Madam Pomfrey twice that she was going to kick him out of the ward the next time she heard him. "You really had celery growing out of your ears?"

Hannah wiped away her tears of mirth. "Yes, my little brother is most definitely going to be magical."

"It's a shame you won't be here when he starts school," Harry said ruefully. "The looks of shock on the first years' faces when the Hat speaks to them are hilarious. Could you imagine what would happen if the Sorting Hat frightened David enough so that he used accidental magic on it? Just think, it might end up having celery growing out of its mouth."

Hannah had to stuff a handkerchief into her mouth to muffle her scream of laughter at the thought of her little brother and the Hat. When she was finally able to pull it out, she stood up. "I think we'd better go before we get thrown out."

Harry walked over to where Luna was lying and spoke to his frozen friend. "I'll see you soon."

As she always did, Hannah leant over and kissed her friend on the cheek. "Bye, Sue. I'll be back after the Easter holidays."

Madam Pomfrey came over. "I'm afraid she won't be here then. Her aunt has decided to move her, together with Miss Lovegood, to St. Mungo's to the long term damage ward until they can be revived."

"But why can't they stay here?" Hannah asked in a worried voice.

"I'm not going to be here over the Easter holidays, just a trainee nurse will be," Poppy informed them. "So it has been decided that the girls should be moved to a safe place where they can still be monitored by fully-qualified medical staff."

Harry glanced back at Luna; he was going to miss his friend even though she couldn't talk to him. "Why won't you be here?"

Poppy told him, "I'm going to spend some time in the US with my husband and family."

Harry and Hannah were both shocked. "You're married?"

"I am, Harry." Poppy smiled at him. "My husband works for the Ministry but he spends a great deal of time overseas, and our two youngest daughters attend Salem Girls' Academy."

"Why don't they come here?" Hannah asked, genuinely interested in what the nurse had to say.

"Because my husband is American, and our children were the first girls to be born into his family for a very long time, and both sets of grandparents now live in Boston." Poppy gave a really big smile. "Also my eldest daughter has just given birth to my first grandson, and I want to spend some time with him."

Harry was surprised that Poppy had shared this much information with them. Over the course of the month the nurse had unbent enough to call him and Hannah by their first names but she was still usually rather reserved. Harry guessed quite correctly that Poppy had to be excited about her grandson to open up this much. "I really thought you lived here."

"Only during time term and when it's my turn to cover holidays." Poppy opened the door. "Now run along. You don't want to miss dinner."

"Have a good Easter," Hannah said politely.

"You too, Hannah." Poppy closed the door behind them before Harry could wish her the same.

"So have you decided what you are doing during Easter?" Hannah asked as they walked slowly down the corridor towards the stairs.

"I'm mostly going to be staying with the Weasleys." Harry stopped at the top of the stairs and cocked his head. "Did you hear something?"

Hannah also stood and listened. "I can't hear anything."

Neither could Harry when he listened again, and they began to walk downstairs. "So what are you doing over the holidays?"

"The usual." Hannah suddenly had an idea. "Harry, would you like to spend some time with me?" Hannah then went red. "Just as a friend, of course."

Harry rather liked Hannah, who had grown closer and closer to him since they had spent so much time together in the hospital wing after weeks earlier, Susan had fell victim to the same fate as Luna. "I would, but since the train leaves tomorrow, I guess it's too late now."

"Why don't you ask Professor Sprout?" Hannah suggested as they reached the Great Hall.

"She went home yesterday," Harry reminded Hannah as he made his way to the Hufflepuff table. Then just before he sat down, he clicked his fingers. "I'll owl Aunt Molly and ask her if I can go to stay with you."

Hannah sat down at the Hufflepuff table next to Harry, not noticing Ginny's annoyed look. "Will you owl her after dinner?"

"You can come with me," Harry offered, also not noticing Ginny's annoyance.

Justin, however, had looked over at Ginny to see a look of distaste cross her face. Later that night, he collared Hannah in the common room, and asked her to go to the library with him. Once inside the library, they made their way to the back. Justin then got straight to the point. "You like Harry, don't you?"

Hannah did not bother denying that she was attracted to Harry. "Yes, but I think that Ginny still does as well."

Justin had to agree with Hannah, but only to a point. "Ginny rejected Harry when she thought he was the big bad. I think she only wants him back because she can't have him now, so watch yourself."

"I doubt Ginny is going to do anything to hurt me," Hannah said, thinking Justin was being a little overzealous.

"Maybe not, but she looked far from pleased when she heard that Harry might be about to visit with you," Justin warned, before noting Hannah's blush. "For someone who was almost as afraid as Ginny, what changed your mind about Harry?"

"Sue did – she told me what her aunt had told her, making me see things from Harry's point of view." Hannah gave a rueful smile. "I was really horrible about him, and seeing how upset he was over Sue's attack, made me feel even worse."

"Why?" Justin asked, being curious.

"Because Sue told me what she and Harry had discussed, and she said that Harry was still willing to give her a chance to become his friend again, even after how she treated him." Hannah sat down in the window bay. "I'm not sure I would have done the same."

"Harry's a good sort." Justin thought the world of his friend. "And I can see why the Hat put him in Hufflepuff."

"So can I." Hannah tilted her head to look at Justin when a comfortable silence fell between the two friends. "Are you missing Luna? You don't seem to mention her that much."

"I did at first," Justin answered honestly. "But as time has gone by, I don't think about her as much as I did." He grimaced. "That sounds horrible, doesn't it? I mean I know you and Harry spend lots of time up in the infirmary and I don't."

"I miss Sue every day." Hannah was just as honest. "And I know Harry misses Luna. He talks to her all the time."

"I used to talk to Luna as well, but I ran out of things to say, so during the last few weeks I've pretty much stopped going." Justin felt guilty and it showed.

Hannah could see it. "Justin, you can't make yourself do something just because you feel bad about it. I bet Luna wouldn't like that."

"You're right." Justin did not think that the girl would. "But it doesn't stop me feeling bad about not going."

"You won't have to worry about that soon. Both girls are going to be moved," Hannah said finally remembering what the nurse had said.

"Where to?" Justin asked in surprise.

Hannah told her what Poppy had relayed. "So I won't be able to talk to Sue when I get back, and you won't have to feel bad about not talking to Luna."

"I suppose." Justin leant back against the window. "But what am I going to do when Luna wakes up? What if I can't find anything to talk about?"

"Do you still like her as a girlfriend?" Hannah asked hesitantly.

"I don't know. I used to like Cho." Justin smiled as Hannah grimaced; Cho was not exactly popular, and he also decided not to share who else he liked. "But then I noticed Luna, and with every day Cho seemed a little less pretty. But then this happened, and now I'm not sure if I like Luna as much as I did. And I don't know what to do about it."

Hannah gently made a suggestion. "I think telling Luna how you feel would be a good start."

"But I don't know how I feel." Justin closed his eyes. "I really don't know."

One Week Later

Harry stood on the platform, Molly at his side. "I don't see them."

"Harry!" Hannah burst through the crowd, panting heavily. "Sorry we're late. The traffic was horrible." It was then that she noticed Molly.

Molly held out her hand. "Hello, I'm Molly Weasley, Harry's guardian."

"Hannah Abbott." Hannah shook Molly's hand. "Do you need to speak to Mum and Dad? They're coming behind me."

"I do." Molly picked up Harry's bag and followed Hannah. They hadn't gotten far when a pretty blonde came towards him. "Is that your mum?"

"Yeah." Hannah pointed to the sandy-haired man following her, carrying a small child. "And that's my dad, and my brother David."

"I'm Tricia Abbott." Hannah's mother introduced herself properly, having caught her daughter's brief explanation as to who she was. "And this is my husband, Michael."

Molly introduced herself again. "I'm Molly Weasley."

Tricia smiled at her. "I remember you from Hogwarts – you were a few years ahead of me and in Gryffindor. I was in Hufflepuff but I was Pattie Greene back then."

Molly thought for a moment before recalling a small dark haired girl. "You've certainly changed."

"Aren't you a teacher now?" Tricia asked with interest. "Hannah has mentioned a Professor Weasley once or twice."

"That was a while back," Molly said, without explaining fully. "I'm no longer teaching at Hogwarts."

"I hate to break this up but is there anything we should know about Harry?" Michael butted in as he shifted his babbling son to his other hip. "Allergies, medications..."

Tricia grinned at her husband. "Michael's a doctor in case you can't guess."

"I don't like coffee," Harry finally offered up. "Does that count?"

"Not really." Michael held out his hand. "Michael Abbott."

"Harry Potter." Harry had been rather nervous about meeting Hannah's parents but he thought that Michael seemed nice enough.

"Well, Harry Potter, my car is on the meter, so we should get going." Michael placed a hand at his wife's back. "It's the black Mercedes parked over there."

Harry took his bag from Molly. "Will you be here to pick me up on Friday?"

"Arthur will be collecting you." Molly gave Harry a brief hug. "Now don't forget to be good for the Abbotts."

"I won't," Harry promised, resisting the urge to roll his eyes and tell his guardian he was almost fourteen and no longer needed to be told to behave. He then turned and followed Hannah to her parents' car.

During the holidays Harry discovered that Hannah's parents were as nice as she was, and he enjoyed his stay at their home even after David used accidental magic on him. Harry therefore decided that when he returned to school, if things were just as good between him and Hannah when they did not have their friends in the hospital to focus on, he would ask her out.

April 16th 1994

His mind made up about how he felt about Hannah, Harry decided to follow up on his decision he had made at the end of the Easter holiday, and as they were walking by the main doors, Harry grabbed Hannah by the hand. "Do you want to come for a walk?"

"I'd like that."

Harry led out Hannah outside, making his way down to the quidditch pitch, which was currently empty, no teams were practicing and the only beings in sight were the birds that were flying over the pitch. Once there, Harry led her over to the base of Hufflepuff tower. "Hannah, I had a really great time over Easter."

Hannah blushed as Harry took hold of her hands. "So did I."

Encouraged, Harry went on. "So would you like to go out with me?"

Her blush deepening, Hannah nodded. "Yes."

Unlike when Ginny had asked him out, this time Harry knew what came next, and he tugged Hannah towards him. And unlike with Ginny, this kiss felt far from awkward, and it was also a little less chaste, but not by much.

As they broke apart, Harry decided he liked kissing Hannah, and holding her more firmly against him, he initiated another kiss, which Hannah willingly responded to, before they separated, Hannah's cheeks a delicate pink. Harry smiled and took her hand. "Shall we go for a walk by the lake?"

Hannah nodded. "There are some nice quite spots there."

Harry's smile widened and he led Hannah away.

1st June 1994

Pomona stood over her destroyed Mandrakes. "Who would do such a thing?"

"Someone who doesn't want the students revived." Minerva looked on at the mess with dismay.

"But why?" Severus could not resist asking, fairly certain that whoever had the diary had wrought the damage.

"Perhaps one of them saw something important," Minerva suggested.

"So why haven't they tried to kill them instead then?" Gilderoy asked. "It would be far more expedient than destroying a plant."

"You can't kill someone who is petrified," Minerva explained patiently to a man she had long ago realized was a complete fraud. "They are effectively suspended in time, and not even the Killing Curse can change that."

"And do you know what petrified them?" Severus asked, wondering if she had figured it out yet.

It turned out she had not. "I'm afraid not but there are many possibilities such as a Cockatrice, a form of Gorgon or a Basilisk. The list is endless."

Pomona's hand flew to her mouth in horror at the idea of something so terrible roaming the school. "We have to close the school early. We can't risk another attack on a student."

"That won't be happening," a voice interrupted, and the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, joined the group of teachers. "I have been updated on the situation by Madam Bones, and I have decided to take action."

Minerva knew immediately what Fudge meant by action. "Hagrid is innocent of any wrongdoing."

"I have little choice, Headmistress," Cornelius said in a voice meant to soothe but instead irritated. "He is being escorted to Azkaban as we speak."

"There was absolutely no proof that it was Hagrid's creature that attacked Myrtle Seaton." Minerva defended the groundskeeper.

"That may be so, but people are crying out for justice," Cornelius announced in a pompous voice, "and it is my duty to see that it is served."

And despite Minerva's best efforts, the Minister for Magic refused to back down.

The Next Day

At a hurriedly called teachers' conference, the teachers were discussing the problem that the attacks presented, Minerva revealing what she had done. "I have decided we need to make safe the school. I've therefore asked Gringotts to send their best warders in to seal off most of the second floor for the time being as I believe the Chamber is located somewhere there, which means that we can at least complete the school year."

"That's all well and good for the children here but what about the children who have been petrified? They are going to be behind in their schooling," Pomona said anxiously.

"I believe that Miss Lovegood will be more than capable of catching up, even given the length of her absence," Filius said confidently. "But Miss Bones may well have to be kept back a year if her marks in her other subjects are the same as in my class."

"I've already reviewed the girls' academic records, and I believe that while Miss Lovegood will have no problem in joining her classmates as you've just said, Miss Bones will find herself struggling. As soon as Miss Lovegood recovers, she can discuss with you her choices for third year, and I will ensure that she joins those classes when she is ready to do so," Minerva told Filius, before moving on. "And in relation to safety, I'd like for watches to be set up."

Severus noted her gaze falling upon him, and he knew if he didn't volunteer, then Minerva would likely foist it on him anyway. "I can arrange that, Headmistress."

Minerva thanked him and then moved on.

29th June 1994

Harry was sitting looking into the fire when he became aware that Justin was standing over him. "What's up?"

Justin relayed the first part of his news, having sat in on the prefects' meeting, his presence requested as vice-captain of the quidditch team. "Hagrid is being released, and he's getting a full pardon."

Harry's face lost its dreamy look, and he smiled widely. "Really?"

"Yes." Justin knew that his next piece of news would not be so well received. "They knew it couldn't be Hagrid who opened the Chamber this time when they found that Creevey kid, who is always taking photos of you, petrified on the second floor a few hours ago. Because Hagrid was in Azkaban, Fudge had to admit that it was also likely that Hagrid had nothing to do with the first time the Chamber was opened."

"That really is great, but there are wards on the second floor floor," Harry reminded Justin of what had been announced when Minerva had called in Gringotts' warders.

"Someone destroyed them," Joyce Kim, a prefect, added to the conversation. "And the school is therefore no longer deemed safe. All lessons have been cancelled and the train will be coming on Saturday to take everyone home. It would have been here sooner but it's currently undergoing maintenance, and they're waiting for a new part."

"Does that mean Hermione and I don't have to go to our detention with Lockhart on Friday?" Harry asked hopefully, not that interested in the Express' current status.

"All detentions stand," James Marsters, the other seventh year prefect said firmly. "Professor Lockhart will collect you from here."

Harry groaned. "Just my luck." Then he grinned. "So does this mean that Malfoy's detention with Professor McGonagall still stands as well?"

"It does." James had to refrain from smirking. He disliked the jumped-up Slytherin as much as Harry. "And the final quidditch match will also take place on Friday." The match had been postponed when Cho Chang had been too upset to play after the death of her great-grandmother, and Ravenclaw currently had no reserve seeker to take her place.

Harry was pleased for his friend. "I bet you're happy about that."

Justin grinned. "Yeah, because now there's a chance that Slytherin might not walk off with the Cup."

"Let's cross our fingers and hope," James said before he pointed towards the bedroom wing when Harry yawned. "Now off to bed."

Once Harry and Justin left the room, James sat down in front of the fire, and brought up the subject he and Joyce had been discussing just before they had entered the common room. "I still think you should have voted to drop the detentions."

Joyce was a great believer in discipline, and was something of a stickler for following the rules. "The pupils who have detention have done something wrong, and therefore need to be punished."

"I still think it was rather mean." James had voted to drop the detentions. "Not all of them deserve detention. Harry is a good kid, and from what I've heard, Lockhart is always picking on him, and this time Granger got into trouble for defending Harry."

"She should have kept her mouth shut then." Joyce, like most of the girls, still thought Lockhart was infallible.

James felt as though he was talking to a brick wall. "I'm not going to change your mind, am I?"

"No." Joyce smiled tightly. "I think I'm going to head off to bed. Goodnight, James."

After James wished her a goodnight, an unsuspecting Joyce headed for her dormitory, having no idea that her vote to uphold the detentions was going to cause trouble for Harry and Hermione.

Next Chapter: Justin fears for Harry.

Chapter 32: Resurrection

It was after three in the morning when Severus opened his door to the persistent rapping. "I'm coming, I'm coming."

"It's about time," the dark-haired young man in the Slytherin uniform said as he pushed past Severus.

Severus gaped in shock. Although he had known that there was a good chance that their plan would work, for some reason he had still expected to see Voldemort, and not this much younger version of the man. And he certainly hadn't expected to see him standing resurrected at his door. "My Lord?"

"No, it's Harry Potter," Tom responded sarcastically, before going on. "Actually, I doubt you're ever likely to see Potter or his Gryffindor friend again."

"You killed them?" Severus asked, glee lighting up his features.

"Not personally no. But they were trapped behind or under a rock fall as far as I know, and if the rocks didn't get them, then Carus will." Tom sat down without being invited, and asked, "Do you have any tea?"

"I'll make some." Severus went into the kitchenette that all the teachers had in their rooms, and tapped on his teapot, before taking out two cups and filling them with the tea and taking them into his sitting area. "Milk or sugar?"

"I would like milk if you have it." Tom shuddered at the thought of tea without milk.

Severus walked back out and returned with a jug of the liquid. "What happened to Lockhart?"

"Dead, of course." Tom put a large splash of milk into his tea, before taking a sip of the light brown liquid. "Do you have any idea how long I've waited to be able to taste something again?"

"I can only guess, my Lord," Severus responded politely.

"First of all, when we are together you can start by calling me Tom." Tom could see that he had surprised Severus. "At least until I find a more suitable name."

"You won't be using Lord Voldemort?" Severus asked.

Tom took another large mouthful of tea. "Absolutely not. After what I've discovered about him, I have no wish for anyone to confuse me with my failure of a predecessor."

"You aren't going to search him out?" Severus asked in shock.

"Of course I am, Severus." Tom gave a tiny, but evil-filled smile. "You can count on it."

Severus felt a cold shiver run down his spine. The young man sitting in front of him looked harmless but Severus was more than aware of what he had done to Myrtle Seaton in order to get into the diary in the first place, and of what he must have done to Lockhart. "So how did Potter take it when he found out about you?"

"He didn't get to find out." Tom took another mouthful of tea, relishing the tangy taste of it. "The rock fall happened before I could complete the transformation, trapping Potter, the girl, and Lockhart half buried beneath it."

"So Lockhart survived the rock fall?" Severus asked.

"Long enough to provide me with the life essence I needed to escape the diary otherwise I wouldn't be here now." Tom's face showed his revulsion as he thought about the deceased teacher. "And it's a good thing he's dead already, otherwise I would have had to kill him just for putting me through the agonies of listening to his whining about his clothes, his fans, his clothes, his books, his clothes, and his next book."

"His next book?" Severus couldn't help but ask, although he was smiling at Tom's repeated comment about Lockhart's clothes.

"His experiences as a teacher..." Tom laughed sardonically. "...if you could call him that. But enough about that fool, I have more important things to deal with."

"My L... Tom," Severus said, quickly changing his form of address. "Is there anything that I can help with?"

"Yes, you can start by burning this." Tom handed over the diary.

Severus eyed it warily as he took from the former Slytherin. "It won't explode?"

"It's completely benign now, but I want no reminders of my incarceration in it," Tom informed Severus, who had aimed his wand at the fireplace, starting a small blaze.

Severus watched nervously as the fire ignited the diary when he threw it in, and a thick, black viscous substance began to ooze out of the diary. The substance was obviously flammable as the fire momentarily flared up, engulfing the diary. When the flames died down, all that was left of the diary was ashes. Only once he was sure that it would be safe to turn his back on the fire, did Severus turn around and address Tom. "So where are you planning to go when you leave here?"

"That's entirely up to you." Tom could see that he had blindsided Severus with his response, but he wanted to see how Severus reacted. "Well, it's not as if I'm rich."

"Neither am I," Severus reminded him. "But I can speak to Lucius Malfoy if you so wish."

"Abraxas' son?" Tom asked, checking that he had remembered correctly what Severus told him.

"Yes," Severus nodded. "As I told you, his grandson, Draco, is a Slytherin in Potter's year."

Tom poured himself some more tea. "Lockhart also told me there was a Malfoy in Slytherin but just like you he didn't say more than that, and at the time I wasn't really that interested. How is the boy doing?"

Severus filled Tom in on Draco's progress, before falling silent.

As he did, Tom met Severus' gaze, an amused smile playing across his lips. "You're not really sure how to take me, are you, Severus?"

"No, I'm not," Severus answered truthfully. "Your predecessor would never have been interested in what Draco was up to."

"Knowledge is everything, Severus, and even insignificant things may be important, something I do believe my predecessor forgot," Tom said softly, before changing the topic of conversation. "So, tell me, Severus, how will you get me out of here?"

"The Express leaves at eleven, a simple glamour, a uniform, and you can walk out of here, and once outside the gates, you can vanish." Severus wrote down an address on a slip of parchment before handing it over. "This is where I live. You can go there until I've sorted something out with Lucius."

"Tell me, what does Lucius do for a job?" Tom asked.

"He doesn't exactly work, but he does have a finger in every pie." Severus thought his old school friend and fellow Death Eater a slippery snake. "He'll be able to find somewhere for you."

Tom fell silent for a long moment, before finally deciding to fill Severus in on what he had decided a few months ago. "Actually I have an option of my own – the Riddle place."

"Your Muggle grandparents' house?" Severus revealed he knew exactly where Tom was talking about.

"Yes." Tom gave a slow cruel smile as he remembered what he had done to them. "I think it only fitting I take it over and use it."

"But I thought you hated them." Severus had talked to the older Voldemort often enough to know this.

"I do, and that's why they're dead," Tom confirmed. "But I need somewhere to set up a base of operation from, and I don't see why I shouldn't make use of what should rightfully be mine."

"You've obviously been thinking about this," Severus noted.

"When you're locked inside a diary, there is little else to do with your time," Tom told him. "Now I need you to find out who is currently living there."

"No-one is." Severus knew the place well – the original Voldemort had made him take a trip to the graveyard when Voldemort had needed a sample of Tom Riddle senior's bones for a potion. Severus' curiosity had overcome him, and he had been unable to resist looking over the house that Voldemort should have grown up in. Expecting luxury, he had been surprised to find it overgrown, dusty, and very much not lived-in. "It's supposed to be haunted."

"Then it will be perfect," Tom decided, before yawning. "I would like to get some sleep."

"Very well." Severus showed him to his bedroom, having little other choice as to where to put the former Slytherin. "I will wake you when the Express is ready to leave."

Just as Tom lay down and closed his eyes, in the Hufflepuff dorms Justin woke up and headed into the bathroom. When he returned, he immediately noticed that Harry's bed hadn't been slept in. After checking his wristwatch, Justin was shocked to note that it was almost four in the morning. Worried, he pulled on his dressing gown and headed out of the bedroom.

Minerva was rudely awoken by an alarm telling her that someone was trying to gain access to her office. Pulling on her dressing gown, she headed to her office and opened up the gargoyles below. Not having checked the instruments that had once belonged to Dumbledore, she was surprised to see a very flustered Justin come bursting through the door. "What's wrong, Mr. Finch-Fletchley?"

"Harry had a detention last night with Lockhart but he's still not back," Justin hurriedly told Minerva. "I've checked the Defense classroom, and I can't find any of them."

"Vickers," Minerva called out, and a house-elf appeared. "Please locate Professor Lockhart for me."

The house-elf didn't pop away as it usually did. "Lockie is gone, Mistress Head."

"Please locate Harry Potter for me," Minerva demanded.

Again the house-elf didn't move. "Pottie is gone, Mistress Head."

"You may go." Minerva aimed her wand at Justin, transfiguring his nightclothes into a uniform before changing her own clothing. "I need to alert the other teachers."

Justin watched as Minerva headed over to her desk and tapped a silvery instrument, a tall thin post that had numerous arms on it on the very top. "I will escort you back to Hufflepuff."

Justin followed Minerva down the stairs and out onto the corridor, only for the Headmistress to stop part way up the corridor. Justin gasped when he saw what Minerva had spotted. "I didn't see it."

"I only caught sight of it at the last second." Minerva turned the full light of her wand onto the wall, and read out loud what was written there. "Their skeletons will lie in the Chamber forever." She turned to Justin. "Their skeletons?"

Justin suddenly remembered about Hermione. "Hermione had a detention with Lockhart as well."

"I need to get you back to Hufflepuff now," Minerva said urgently. "Take my arm."

After departing Hogwarts a good later than he would have liked, Severus arrived home to find Tom sitting in his study reading through a potions subscription. "Good evening, my Lord."

"Don't forget, call me Tom." Tom was not in the mood for obsequiousness. "How did it go?"

"No-one knows where the entrance to the Chamber is. Bones is going to arrange for periodic searches, but we both know that she'll find nothing." Severus sat down opposite Tom. "So I think that at long last, Potter has finally joined his precious father, along with his Mudblood know-it-all friend."

"Excellent." Tom was pleased with the news. "Now let us move onto more pertinent matters. I want to know exactly what happened the night Voldemort was vanquished."

"Well, I'm happy for you to use Occlumency, but..." Severus began, only to be interrupted.

Tom shook his head. "I want to see the memory from outside of your mind, Severus."

"I don't have a pensieve." Severus couldn't afford such a rare luxury.

"Then we need to steal one," Tom declared. "Voldemort might have perfected his use of Occlumency but for me it would be exhausting."

Severus was surprised that Tom would open up about being so vulnerable but as Severus had sworn an oath of allegiance to him that very morning when Minerva's alarm had disturbed both him and Tom, he was aware the young man had little to worry about from him. "Griselda Marchbanks is the keeper of the Ministry pensieves. Perhaps we could persuade her to part with one."

"I have no wish to alert anyone to my presence just yet, so it will have to wait," Tom decided, before filling Severus in on his day. "I apparated to the Riddle place before coming here, and it's a mess. I will need a large injection of cash, and if your friend, Malfoy, is as affluent as you say, then I expect him to come up with some suggestions. I'm also hoping he can solve my pensieve problem, so I would like to meet with him tomorrow."

"I not sure if Lucius owns a pensieve." Severus had never heard Lucius mention one but he was also aware that that didn't mean that the man didn't possess one. "But we can ask. In the meantime, is there anything I can get for you?"

"I would like something decent to eat." Tom indicated the half-eaten sandwich that lay on a plate on the table beside him.

"Then let me change, and we can go to a small restaurant near here," Severus offered and he left the room. After the day he had had, it was the last thing he wanted to do but he recognized an order even if it was not couched as one.

Malfoy Mansion

Tom sat down in a chair when offered to do so by Lucius. It was obvious from Lucius' face that he, like Severus, had not expected such a young visitor. "I do hope that my age is not going to be a problem, Lucius."

"Of course not, my Lord," Lucius immediately said. "I am at your service."

Severus noted that Tom did not correct Lucius' form of address. "We need to know if you own a pensieve, Lucius."

"I do," Lucius confirmed. "I will have a house-elf fetch it."

Tom decided to test Lucius out. "You can do it."

Lucius hesitated before bowing low and leaving the room. As he did, Severus turned to Tom. "Why didn't you ask him to call you Tom?"

"I've decided that doing so might lead to a familiarity I'm not sure I want to foster with Lucius just yet," Tom said in explanation. He turned to Lucius as he re-entered the room. "Were you there the night Voldemort was struck down by the boy Potter?"

"I was, but I did not enter the cottage, my Lord," Lucius said as he placed the pensieve on the table.

Tom took out the wand he had taken from Lockhart. "Very well. Kneel before me. I believe an update to your oath of allegiance is necessary."

After Lucius had done what was necessary, he stepped aside as Tom bade Severus to withdraw a memory and placed it into the pensieve. Tom then nodded to both men. "You may watch with me."

Severus entered the pensieve along with Tom and Lucius. Together the three men watched as a much younger Severus was ordered to join Lord Voldemort, a third man trailing behind them as the door to Potters' cottage was blasted off, James Potter hurrying to block them. At a nod from his Master, Severus had moved to stand off against James, who had screamed out in the direction of the stairs for Lily to take the twins and run. Two minutes later James was dead.

Commanded to do so, Severus followed Voldemort upstairs; the third man, Wormtail, hovering several stairs below them, not daring to follow after having being told to remain downstairs.

Watching his younger self, Severus felt his heart lurch at the sight of the desperate Lily who was trying to shield her children. Voldemort had graciously said he would allow her to live if she did not interfere, and Severus could still remember the sinking feeling as Lily had refused to step aside and she had been killed where she stood. Only quick reflexes had saved Severus from the backlash of the spell that Voldemort had used on the first of the young babies in the crib.

Tom halted the memory. "Do you know what she did to allow the boy to live, Severus?"

Severus shook his head. "Dumbledore believed it was old magic – an incantation that she had performed so that one of her children might survive."

"And as you were once her lover, she told you nothing of this beforehand?" Tom asked bluntly.

Severus denied it. "She did not. The last time we spoke was when I cured her of a curse sent by the Dark Lord. She told me then that she no longer wanted anything to do with me."

"And yet Voldemort was going to spare her – a Mudblood?"

Severus resisted the urge to squirm. "I asked him to do so but Lily had no idea that I had done so."

"And I doubt she would have done anything different, even if she had," Tom said, somewhat nastily. "Very well, we can withdraw. It's not as if Potter is going to cause us any more problems."

Hogwarts

Minerva walked along the corridor until she came to the wall where the words that had sealed Harry and Hermione's fates had been written. "Harry, I'm sorry we let you down." Minerva took out a handkerchief and blew her nose vigorously. She felt almost as guilty about Hermione, whose parents had been distraught at the news.

Filius walked up behind his friend and colleague and placed a hand on her arm. "We're wise but not omnipotent, Minerva. We couldn't have known what Lockhart would do."

Minerva turned to face Filius. "I keep replaying Lockhart's behavior over and over in my mind, and I still find it hard to believe that he would do such a thing."

"Neither can I, but he did." Filius too had replayed all of his conversations that had taken place with Lockhart over and over again but he had noticed nothing that indicated that the Defense teacher had opened the Chamber. "He seemed completely clueless about the whole Chamber mystery." He changed the subject slightly. "Did Amelia's team have any luck this time?"

Minerva shook her head. "She said that she'll continue to send them in once a week to continue the search for the Chamber."

Filius and Minerva were surprised to hear a polite cough, and then a voice said, "We're sorry to interrupt."

Minerva pulled away from Filius' hand and turned to face the two men standing behind her, wiping her eyes as she regained control of her runaway emotions. "What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"We need full access to Hogwarts to search for the Chamber," the tallest of the cloaked two men said.

"May I see your I.D.?" Minerva asked, wanting to ensure that these men were what they appeared to be. After checking the men's IDs, Minerva had little choice but to acquiesce to the men's request; Unspeakables ranked far higher than she did, and even had jurisdiction over the Minister for Magic, just as the head of BritAD did. "Very well. If you need anything..."

The slightly shorter man interrupted. "We don't."

Later that day

The two men reported in to their head, who was standing in the Hall of Prophecy. "Sorry, Sir, but the trail is completely cold. There's absolutely no sign of Harry Potter, Hermione Granger or Gilderoy Lockhart."

"Potter is still alive somewhere," Ignotus said, pointing to a round globe with his wand. "The prophecy globe would have died and turned black if either Potter or You-Know-Who were dead. And since

we know You-Know-Who isn't dead no matter what others believe, and given the fact that the globe is still animate, Potter must still also be alive." His hand disappeared inside his cloak as he scratched his chin. "We need those students brought around. I don't care how you make it happen or what it costs, get hold of some Mandrakes that are mature."

"Yes, Sir," the two men said together.

Three Days Later

Feeling strange and disorientated, Luna opened her eyes to find her father standing over her. "Daddy, what are you doing here?"

"I think you should take a look around," Xenophilius said as he sat down by his daughter.

Luna quickly realized she was in a hospital room. "What am I doing in hospital?"

"What's the last thing you remember, angel?" Xenophilius asked softly, stroking his daughter's hair.

"I was walking up the corridor, but I realized I had left something in the library and so I went back." To Luna it seemed as though it was only moments ago. "I heard a hissing noise, and I thought that Nagini must have gotten out and come looking for Harry again." Luna smiled in remembrance. "The last time she escaped she was found outside the Transfiguration classroom; somehow she had gotten up onto the window ledge. So I looked towards the window, and that's the last thing I remember. What happened?"

"You were found looking at the window," Xenophilius explained. "You'd been petrified. But thankfully the Ministry found a supply of maturing Mandrakes in India, and the potion is being administered to your other friends."

"Others?" Luna asked in a shocked voice.

"Two other children were also found petrified." Xenophilius could see how much of a surprise this was to his daughter.

"Who?" Luna asked.

Xenophilius told his daughter about the incidents that had happened after her own. "A girl named Susan Bones was petrified in February, just after Valentines' Day. She realized that she had accidentally included her Transfiguration homework in her Defense homework, and she was heading for the defense teacher's classroom when she never came back. And a boy from Gryffindor, Colin Creevey, was found clutching his camera on the second floor after it was supposed to have been sealed off."

"Thank goodness no-one died," Luna said with relief, before something hit her. "But that means that the Chamber has to be on the second floor."

"That's why the floor had been sealed off," Xenophilius said, confirming Luna's suspicions. "But I'm afraid I have bad news for you, someone is missing, and although it is believed that they might still be alive, it's doubtful that they can last much longer if they're not found."

"Justin?" Luna asked after her boyfriend first.

"No, he's actually outside waiting to see you," Xenophilius grimaced.

"Daddy!" Luna berated her father.

"Sorry." Xenophilius didn't mean it though. He didn't like his precious daughter dating anyone.

Luna looked pointedly at her father. "So who is missing then? Was it someone I know?"

"Luna, angel, I'm afraid it's your friends Harry and Hermione." Xenophilius' stomach flopped over as his daughter's face crumpled. "I'm so sorry."

Luna began to weep, and she let her father gather her up.

Similar scenes were taking place in the remaining rooms where the other two children were being resuscitated.

Susan had just been resuscitated when Amelia turned at the sound of rapping at the door and the sound of it then opening. "Minerva, this isn't a good time."

"It's important, Amelia." Minerva's voice was grave.

Amelia turned to her dazed niece. "Don't get worrying, Susan, I'll explain everything in a moment." She then turned to Minerva. "This had better be good."

"We believe we know where on the second floor the entrance to the Chamber is," Minerva said immediately.

Amelia was absolutely stunned. "How?"

Minerva recited what Colin had told her and Colin's father. "From Colin Creevey. Mr. Creevey said he heard Lockhart speaking Latin – I think he was bringing down the wards – before Lockhart entered the second floor. Mr. Creevey followed him onto the second floor, intending to take a photo of what he was doing. After spotting Lockhart going into the girls' bathroom on the second floor, Mr. Creevey waited outside with his camera, and when he heard a noise, he snapped a photo. That's the last thing he remembers."

Susan interrupted. "I think I know exactly where the Chamber is."

Both women turned around, Amelia taking point. "Where?"

Susan then went onto explain the last thing she remembered. "I was caught short and needed a bathroom, so I nipped along to the one on the second floor. I'd almost reached it when I saw Lockhart going into the toilets, and when he didn't come out after a while, I followed him in. I saw that a sink wasn't where it should be, and I was walking over when I slipped on a pool of water, and that's the last thing I remember."

"In that case I'll send more men to try and locate the Chamber," Amelia told Minerva. "If we can open it and destroy whatever is in there, then you can re-open the school."

"Actually the Unspeakables have taken over jurisdiction. Apparently their head intervened," Minerva revealed. "They're the ones who located the Mandrakes so that we could wake the children."

Amelia loathed Ignotus, who she had met several times. She was fed up with him and his men poking their noses in where they didn't belong, but as his jurisdiction overrode her own, she had little choice but to stand aside. "Then I'll let them deal with it."

Hogwarts

Although he had been unable to detect Harry's scent by the sinks, Remus had managed to locate a sink where the taps didn't work and that had a small snake was etched onto it. "I think this is it."

His partner, an Unspeakable named Altus, examined the sink. "So how do we move it?"

"Let's try all the unlocking spells we know," Remus suggested, being senior to his partner and in charge of the operation.

A short time later, both men had exhausted their repertoire of unlocking spells, and Altus made an alternative suggestion. "I think we should destroy the sink."

Remus agreed. "Stand back and put up a shield around me as soon as I incant the spell."

Altus did as Remus told him, but both men were astounded when Remus' spell failed, the sink scorched but intact. "That's impossible."

"It must be imbued with some sort of anti-destruction spell," Remus said. He then tried all the counters he knew before asking Altus to shield him again. Once more they were unsuccessful.

Altus whistled. "Whoever set this up knew what they were doing."

Remus decided to try and attack the problem from a different angle. "I'll be back shortly."

When Remus returned he wasn't alone, and he gave orders to the ten Unspeakables he had drafted in. "I want everyone to fan out. I need you to search the grounds for an entrance to the school that may be hidden. Look for any decals of snakes like this. Search pattern Delta."

Altus remained with Remus. "Snake decals?"

"I know of a hidden entrance to the school, which pertains to one of the houses and has a decal on it," Remus explained. "I'm hoping that as Salazar Slytherin was supposed to be the one who built the Chamber, there might be a similar entrance into it."

"That's a bit of a long shot, isn't it?"

"It's the only thing I can think of at the moment, at least without blowing up half of the school."

"And if the search brings up nothing?"

"Then I'm going to blow the school if I have to," Remus told him. "Let's get out there."

Two days later Remus had to admit to defeat and he went to Minerva. "I need your permission to use Muggle explosives, Headmistress."

Minerva's eyes widened. "You can't be serious, Amicus."

"Deadly," Remus said, his voice severe.

Minerva nodded. "You have my permission."

However Remus' ploy failed, the bathroom remaining as intact as it had done when he had used magic to try and destroy the sink.

Azkaban

Sirius sauntered casually up to the cell door. "Good morning, Minister."

"Black," Cornelius scowled at him. "What do you want?"

Sirius was rather surprised by the Minister's attitude. Even though he was a prisoner, they were usually fairly amenable towards each other, but not this time. "Is something wrong?"

"If there was, it would be none of your business," barked out Dolores Umbridge, who as usual was accompanying Cornelius. Her voice

then became oily and obsequious. "Minister, we have better things to do than to waste our time here."

"Quite," Cornelius agreed. "Let us proceed."

"Before you go, may I have the newspaper?" Sirius asked, spotting it sticking out of Cornelius' briefcase.

Cornelius didn't get a chance to answer as Dolores replied in his stead. "Absolutely not. It's bad enough that Harry Potter might be dead without allowing you a newspaper to gloat over your triumph." As had been the case since Harry's disappearance had been announced, there was a story about him dying in that day's paper, even though this had yet to be confirmed, both through the globe dying and the Weasley family clock. Fudge, however, was utterly convinced that the stories were eventually going to prove correct.

Sirius took a step back as if struck. "Dead?"

"Don't act as if you don't know." Dolores didn't believe Sirius' surprised act, and she turned away and once more addressed Cornelius. "Minister, we need to get going, otherwise we will be late for your next appointment."

Cornelius didn't look at Sirius, and following Dolores, he headed off to check on the other inmates of the high security area.

Across from Sirius, Albus was shaking. "How did you do it?"

"I didn't," Sirius said, his voice choked up with tears.

Albus was furious as he watched Sirius swipe at his face. "I don't know how you have the gall to pretend to care, you son-of-a-bitch. You've lost us our last hope to defeat Voldemort."

Sirius' anger also exploded. "That's all Harry was to you: a means to an end. In some respects I'm glad he's no longer around. No-one like you can ever manipulate him ever again."

Their argument was interrupted as a warder came along, his wand drawn. "Black, back up to the wall, kneel, and put your hands behind your head."

This was standard procedure when removing a prisoner from a cell, and so Sirius did as he was told, wondering what was happening. He soon found out as he was escorted to an interview room where he found himself facing an Unspeakable. "Who are you?"

The Unspeakable identified himself. "My name is Amicus."

Sirius had no idea that it was Remus behind the mask. "And what do you want?"

"To question you about the Chamber of Secrets," Remus said, having exhausted all other options.

"The Chamber of Secrets?" Sirius responded in a bewildered voice, completely taken aback by the question.

"I need the password to get in. I know you must know it," Remus declared, his voice cold and forbidding.

Sirius laughed bitterly. "You think that because I was supposedly Voldemort's henchman that I'm going to know how to get into a mythical Chamber?"

Remus could feel disbelief and enmity coming from Sirius. "I do."

"Well, I don't," Sirius snapped.

Remus knew he was telling the truth. "Then we have nothing further to discuss."

Sirius was told to get to his feet, but he had one more question, which he fired off at Remus as Remus started to head for the door that led out of the room. "Why did you want to know?"

Remus ignored him and continued on his way to his next interview: Bellatrix Lestrange was waiting for him in the next room, although he doubted that she would be likely to talk to him. He was right; she refused to answer anything, instead telling him that her master was going to return and kill them all.

Frustrated, he left the prison.

Next Chapter: Ron and Justin help to search for Harry and Hermione, who are locked together in the Chamber.

Note: There will probably be no update until after the New Year, so I want to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Chapter 33: Encounter with a Basilisk

Eight Days Earlier

After Gilderoy Lockhart had collected Harry from Hufflepuff, he said little until they reached a classroom. "In here."

Harry walked in, and spotting Hermione with her head on a desk, he turned around to ask a question, only to be hit by a spell he didn't see coming. All at once his world became a hazy mist, and he was aware of Lockhart saying something, but he didn't really care that much what it was, he felt too good. Although he had practiced the Imperius curse with Remus, this time the spell cast on him was far stronger, and Harry would take much longer to come to realize that something was wrong.

Unaware that even though Harry at that moment had no idea he was under the Imperius curse and Harry would soon begin to fight against him, Gilderoy gave Harry his instructions. "Potter, you will make your way to the second floor girls' bathroom, where you will head for the sink closest to the window, and you will utter "open" and then "stairs" in Parseltongue. Once you have done this, go down the stairs, and when you reach the base of them, wait for us there."

In a happy state, Harry did exactly as Lockhart wanted, but even as he did, his befuddled brain finally began to discern that something wasn't quite right. By the time Harry had reached the sink, he was beginning to fight hard against the spell that was holding him in its grasp but it still wasn't enough to prevent him from following the order he had been given. And as Harry hissed out "open", the sink slid back, allowing him access to a deep, dark hole. After hissing out the word 'stairs', Harry made his way to the bottom of them, and then stood and waited for Lockhart to join him.

When Lockhart and Hermione reached the bottom of the stairs a few minutes later, Harry moved on as ordered, stumbling over the animal skeletons that littered the floor and falling to his hands and knees. "Ouch."

An unsmiling Gilderoy demanded, "Get up, Potter."

Harry's fuzzy head now started to clear, the pain emanating from his bloody hands and knees penetrating what was left of the fog, and he began to fight even harder to shake off the vestiges of the spell.

As Hermione also stumbled over the skeletons, Lockhart's attention was drawn elsewhere, and he didn't notice that Harry was about to slip through his grasp. Harry finally snapped back to himself when a grating noise reached his ears, and he became aware that he was in a darkened cavern, and that a round door surrounded by engraved snakes was rolling back to reveal a large gaping entrance. Lockhart turned back to issue another demand. "Through there, Potter."

"No," Harry refused, beginning to back away from the teacher.

Realizing that his subject was no longer under his spell, Lockhart aimed his wand at Harry. "Imperio."

Harry ducked and aimed his own wand at Lockhart, surprised the man hadn't taken it from him. "Stupefy."

"Reducto," Lockhart yelled out, as he pushed Hermione forward so that she would act as a shield against any spell Harry might cast.

As the Reducto spell hurtled towards Harry, fear he was going to die almost overwhelmed him, and he began to incant what was going to end up being an overpowered and panic driven stunning spell. But Harry's efforts were far too late and Lockhart's Reducto spell glanced off his left leg sending Harry flying just as he completed the stunning incantation. Having been sent flying through the air, Harry's spell went off-center, missing both Hermione and Lockhart and hitting the ceiling instead.

For a moment nothing happened, then an almighty rumbling began, and realizing what was happening, Lockhart stopped mid-spell in order to glance up. What he saw drove him to jump backwards, and he was soon lost from Harry's sight as the ceiling came down.

On Harry's side, he had been lucky that the spell had been traveling away from him, but he had still been knocked over by the explosion.

Immediately he called out, "Hermione?"

"Here," a voice came back.

After shaking off dust and bits of rock, Harry climbed unsteadily back onto his feet and spotted his friend. "I was afraid you'd been hit."

Hermione was dusty and had a few scratches, but little more than that. She picked up her book bag. "How do we get out?"

Harry glanced over at the pile of large rocks that now prevented Lockhart from attacking them again but also prevented them from leaving. Aiming his wand at the rocks, he tried to remove one, only for more boulders to come crashing down. "Get back, Hermione!"

Hermione stepped back and once the dust had settled again, she realized that if they tried to remove the rocks for a second time they could well bring the ceiling down altogether. "Just great!"

Harry turned away from the rock fall, and he was quickly reminded of his bloody leg injury that was now beginning to hurt. "Ouch."

Hermione immediately pulled off her tie. "I know Muggle First Aid." She then used the tie to stem the flow of blood. "You really should put that leg up and lie down."

Harry shook his head. "We need to find a way out."

And so the two children headed into the newly opened cavern and began to search for another way out. They didn't find one, and after an hour of searching, Harry was getting lightheaded, and so he sat down heavily on the floor, and picking on a second option, not that he expected it to work, he called out, "Hello, can anyone hear me?"

No sound came back, and, after several more attempts to call for help in English, Harry decided to try in Parseltongue, especially as he had a vague recollection of Lockhart telling him to use it to get into the cavern. Harry was soon to regret his decision.

The first few times he tried, nothing happened but on his fourth attempt a loud and worrying slithering sound reached Harry's ears, and he glanced over to where the sound was coming from.

Hermione paled as she looked at the statue of Salazar Slytherin that dominated the far end of the inner cavern. "There's something in there, Harry."

Harry was more alarmed when a large tongue flickered out of the statue's mouth, and Harry had the sinking feeling that this had to be the creature that had attacked his friends. So, deciding that he didn't want to end up petrified like them, or end up with his heart torn out like Myrtle, Harry got to his feet. "Let's go back."

They didn't get far though, the rock fall blocking their only way out and leaving them with nowhere to hide. The two children therefore had no choice but to turn back into the inner chamber. Glancing almost reflexively at the statue as they re-entered the chamber, Harry could now see a snout as well as a tongue, and he shivered with fear when he saw how immense they were, and he wondered what sort of creature it was.

Hermione pointed at the side tunnels they had discovered when first looking for a way out. "We should try hiding in there."

Before he could move though, Harry heard a voice hissing, "kill, kill, kill", and he froze.

Hermione tugged at his hand. "What is it?"

"A snake," Harry blurted out as he finally worked out what the creature was and why he must have been able to hear voices in the walls. "It's a snake."

Hermione began to rack her brains to think of what sort of snake it might be.

Deciding to try and bluff his way out of the situation, Harry hissed back, "I understand you. I don't want to hurt you but I will if you come out."

The snake ignored Harry, and forcing its head forward, it hissed the same mantra over and over again. Harry could now see even more of the snout and he decided that trying to threaten the thing obviously wasn't working. "It's still coming."

Hermione tugged Harry towards the first side tunnel, fear tingeing her voice. "I think I know what it is, Harry."

When she didn't immediately answer, Harry asked impatiently. "Well?"

Hermione's voice was shaking as she answered him. "I think it's a Basilisk."

"How do we fight it?"

"I don't think we can, not without a weasel," Hermione hurriedly answered. "And if we look at it, it will kill us."

Harry gulped, and then all of a sudden an idea came to him. "I'm going to cast an invisibility spell on us."

"That's a seventh year spell," Hermione pointed out, having read about it.

"And I can cast it," Harry said, before proving it by casting the spell on both of them.

"It will still be able to smell us," Hermione reminded him, although it was obvious that Harry wasn't taking any notice of her as he shed one of his shoes, dropping it the floor where it became visible again.

It vanished as Harry picked it up and limped up the tunnel. "I'm heading for the end of the tunnel. Follow me."

Hermione watched in the dim light as the shoe reappeared and then disappeared down the tunnel: Harry had hurled it as hard as he could up the tunnel. It worked, and Harry, who had closed his eyes after doing so, ending up feeling rather than seeing the snake go by as it followed the sound. As soon as the slithering receded, Harry made a decision. "We need to get up there in the statue."

"It's where it lives!" Hermione exclaimed, guessing where Harry was talking about.

"There may be another way through," Harry said as he began to dash across the cavern, his leg protesting as he splashed through the water that was pooled on the cavern floor.

Although she couldn't see Harry, Hermione could see the water splashing as he ran. Hurriedly she followed him.

After a brief but tiring climb, the two of them shuffled into the mouth of Salazar Slytherin. Harry gasped as he looked around. "There's an old bed, bottles and some books in here!" He was unsurprised when he saw two of the books vanish into the thin air. "Hermione!"

"They're Defense books, Harry," Hermione said as if he should know. "They might be able to help us."

Harry could see there was a tunnel at the back of the mouth. "Go through that tunnel to the rear."

The two children ran down the tunnel, Harry more limping than running, until they came to a doorway. Heading through it, they discovered a small stream running along the back of a little stone-lined room, but nothing else.

Hermione immediately barked out, "Drop the spell on me."

Harry removed it from both of them and watched as Hermione quickly scoured the two books she had picked up.

"Basilisks are notoriously difficult to kill. Their skin is impervious to most spells... blah, blah, blah." Suddenly Hermione turned to Harry. "We need the rest of those books and that bed."

"What?" Harry asked, not following Hermione.

Hermione reached out and grabbed his wand, and then she ran back down the corridor. Harry swore softly to himself before following her.

Gathering up all of the books, Hermione threw them onto the bed. "I'm going to float the bed back to the stream room. Check to see what's in those bottles."

Harry limped over to the stone shelf and read the labels. "They're all ginger ale, and there's a rusty tin of corned beef."

"Forget the tin and bring the pop," Hermione demanded.

Harry could feel nervous sweat running down his back as they headed back down the corridor and into the small room. Once inside,

Hermione lowered the bed down and then grabbed her bag. "I'm going to make a fire."

Harry watched as Hermione made a small fire using a Charms book before aiming the borrowed wand at it. "Inflammaré Maximus."

The fire immediately flared higher and Harry stepped back. "Where did you learn that trick?"

"I didn't," Hermione said, flopping onto the bed. "It was mentioned in the piece about the Basilisk. And I don't know why I said a weasel would kill it. It's a rooster that will."

"So why have we lit a fire?"

"Because, like most animals, it doesn't like fire, and more than that, it helps to blind it."

Suddenly a hissing noise reached Harry's ears. "It's coming."

Satisfied that the fire would hold, Hermione called out a warning to Harry. "Close your eyes and keep quiet."

Harry did as he was told, and soon the hissing noise and the threats to kill went away. Then Harry collapsed down beside Hermione on the bed, before asking something he had put off doing while they had been searching for a way out. "Do you have any idea how we got down here or where we are?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "No to the first question, but we have to be in the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry's heart sank. "Then no-one's going to find us."

"Don't say that," Hermione said, although deep down she knew he was right.

"We have to face reality, Hermione," Harry said in a firm voice, believing his friend was refusing to face the truth. "Nobody knows how to get into this place – there's no way anybody is coming to rescue us."

"Then we need to work out how to get out on our own," Hermione responded, refusing to believe that they would die in the Chamber. She pointed at the small stream. "That has to go somewhere."

Harry got up off the bed and knelt down by it. "Pass me my wand."

Hermione handed it over, watching as Harry cast a spell so that he could try and see where the water was disappearing. "What can you see?"

"Nothing much," Harry said, getting up. "And I'm afraid that if we destroy the wall, we may bring it down on top of us."

"It's better than staying here," Hermione said, reaching out to grab the wand, but her efforts were thwarted when Harry holstered it.

"No. What if we succeed and bring the Basilisk with us?" Harry asked. "I don't fancy that thing coming up the tunnel behind me, and we don't even know if we can out that way."

Hermione bounced back onto the bed. "So, what do you suggest we do?"

"For the moment we sit tight," Harry told his rather sulky friend. He knew she was frightened, as was he, but rushing into things was not the answer. "I have a packet of chocolate mice in my pocket, and we have water."

"But we don't have a bathroom," Hermione said in a tart voice, her cheeks burning slightly.

"We can't leave this room, so whatever we need to do we need to do it in the stream – at least it will flow away," Harry said, his own cheeks turning red at the thought of what they might have to do in front of each other. "But I do know how to cast a privacy spell, and I'll teach it to you."

Somewhat mollified, Hermione pulled out the remaining books from her bag and checked inside. "I have two bags of sugar free sweets that have been in here since Christmas but they should be okay, ten sugar quills and two packets of rich tea biscuits."

"You have biscuits in your bag?"

"I like to nibble on them if I'm hungry, and they're nice and plain," Hermione said, defending her bag's contents. "Be glad I have."

"Sorry," Harry said, sitting down beside Hermione. "Okay, so we have a little food. I think we need to ration it though."

Hermione looked more closely at the bottles Harry had grabbed. "Gilberts Ginger Ale. There's no expiration date on these bottles. I think they're magical."

Harry pushed his thumb against the metal lid, which popped off with a whoosh, and the smell of fresh ginger filled the air. "Muggle drinks don't smell as strong as that."

"Do you think it's safe to drink?"

Harry tested out the bottle and took a tentative sip. "It's tastes really nice."

Hermione was not so fond of ginger ale but after also taking a slight sip, she was unable to detect any odd taste. "I think magic must have kept it fresh. I wish there had been more than a rusty old can of corned beef."

"Well, I'm not going back to check," Harry said, setting the bottle of ginger ale down on the floor. "How long will this fire stay this big?"

Hermione shrugged. "The book didn't say. I think we should take turns to watch it."

Harry yawned. "I'll take first watch."

"No, I will," Hermione said, as she was far from tired. "You get some sleep. I'm going to sit and read some of these books."

Hermione sat up in the bed. "Harry, I think it's coming again."

"I hear it," Harry said. And as he had on the four other occasions over the last five days, he tried to reason with the basilisk. "Go away. We don't want to hurt you but we will if you don't as we say."

"Kill!" the basilisk hissed. "Die! Die! Die!"

The basilisk remained for five minutes but was unable to get close because of the fire. Eventually it gave up and slithered off.

Harry sat down on the bed. "It's as if it doesn't understand me."

"Or doesn't care," Hermione said, climbing out of the bed. "I'm so glad that Susan taught me that cleaning spell. Our clothes would be rather smelly by now if she hadn't."

"I still think they smell a bit stale," Harry said, and he pointed to the large rock that sat close to the stream. "I washed my socks and underwear in the stream when you were sleeping, and hung them up there."

"I'll do the same when you're sleeping," Hermione answered. "I really wish I could brush my teeth properly. Magical spells are all good and well but it's not the same."

"I'm more interested in getting a decent meal," Harry said, before changing the subject. "So what do you think I should read next?"

Hermione still had five books left, having already burnt six. "How about 'So You Want to be a Dark Lord'?"

Harry took the book. "Whoever thinks of these stupid titles?"

"I don't know, but I imagine it's not a bestseller," Hermione told him. "There are some rather horrible spells in there."

Harry looked inside the book, his top lip curling up with distaste at the sight of some of the pictures. "Ugh! I don't need to see these, and besides, I know that they have to be Dark Spells."

Hermione agreed. "I know, and they're the sort of spells I can imagine Death Eaters using. But that book contains the counter-curses just in case you're hit by such a spell. It's these that I think you should learn."

His rather empty stomach churning, Harry began to read about the spells and their counters, before closing the book. "They're not exactly useful. I can't practice these, not that I'd want to."

"And I'm not volunteering," Hermione said, a small smile on her lips, before it fell away. "Harry, do you really think we're going to get out?"

"I do but we'll give them a little longer," Harry said, sitting down next to Hermione and taking her hand, which was trembling. "I'm really afraid of bringing down the ceiling if I try and blow a hole through to where that stream goes."

"And if no-one shows up?"

"Then we have to try it," Harry said. 'At least we know because of the Weasleys' clock they'll have some idea we're alive.'

"That you're alive," Hermione pointed out. "My parents will be worried sick."

"There must be some sort of spell they can do to work it out," Harry said, although he had no idea if this was true or not.

Hermione brightened and bent down, picking up a thick charms book. "Perhaps there might be something in here."

However, after searching the entire book, Hermione's hope faded, and Harry pulled her against him awkwardly as a tear ran down her cheek. "Just because you couldn't find a spell in there doesn't mean one doesn't exist."

"But what if there is and you need to be magical to cast it?" Hermione said, throwing up roadblocks. "My parents aren't magical, Harry."

As Hermione gave into tears brought about by tiredness, hunger and despair, Harry patted her back and whispered soft words of comfort, although he too was more than a little scared that they might never get out.

Present Time

Molly glanced at her clock and then back down at the Prophet. "I don't know why they printed that Harry is dead. His hand says he not."

"I know and I'm going back again today," Remus told her, his face hidden by the folds of his hood, not wanting to reveal his identity to those of the Weasley family who were there who had no idea who he was.

A hopeful Ron asked, "Can I come, Sir?"

Both George and Fred also asked the same thing, as did Justin, who had been invited to stay with the Weasleys while the search for Harry and Hermione continued. Hermione's parents had refused, aware from what their daughter had previously told them, about the circumstances in the Burrow. So instead they were staying at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade, so that they could be near in case of a change of situation.

Although he could feel the boys' desperation, Remus still shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't allow that."

Unlike her sons and Justin, fully aware of who was behind the hood, Molly placed a hand on his arm, hoping to appeal to Remus' kinder side. "The boys will stay out of trouble, Amicus. They just want to be there when they find Harry, as do I."

Remus was unable to deny the woman who had taken Harry in, and he therefore nodded slowly. "Very well, you can all come with me, but you need to keep out of the way."

"We will," Molly promised, and she kissed Arthur, before disappearing with Ron and Justin to arrive just outside of Hogwarts, Remus appearing beside her with the twins.

As they walked at a brisk pace up towards the school, Ron glanced nervously at the tall, cloaked man who was leading the way. "What's going to happen today, Sir?"

Remus could tell from the gasping words that Ron was struggling to keep up, and Remus slowed his pace and fell in step with Ron. "I'm going to search the grounds again."

"Can we search as well?" Ron immediately asked, although he had heard only too clearly about Remus wanting them out of the way.

Remus thought about it for a moment before deciding that the boys couldn't do any harm and, he therefore agreed to Ron's request. "Okay then. We're currently looking for a decal, a sort of sign, of a snake." Remus flicked his wand into the air and a shape similar to the one that had been on the tap appeared in flames in the air. "It looks like this and it may be hidden in the grass or by bushes but if you find anything, let me know. Don't do anything stupid."

"I won't, Sir," Ron promised, eager to start searching for his friends. George, Fred and Justin all promised the same, especially when Molly also backed up Remus' warning about not doing anything foolhardy.

Upon reaching the school, Molly headed inside to see Minerva as Remus and the boys joined the small group of Unspeakables who were once again going to carry out a sweep of the school.

While the twins were directed off towards the lake, Ron and Justin found themselves being directed towards a section at the back of the school where Remus didn't think they could get into too much trouble and was actually on the opposite side of where the main search was being carried out that day. Even though Ron had realized that he was being shunted off, just like Justin had, he still took his responsibility seriously, and dropping to his knees, he spent two hours searching with his fingertips for a decal like the one Remus had mentioned, finding nothing.

Having reached the actual wall of the castle, and now feeling tired and thirsty, Ron sat down to lean against the wall sitting on the pavers that surrounded the end of the castle. "Merlin, it's hot."

Justin flopped down beside Ron. "I wish I'd thought about bringing some pop." Then he suddenly sat upright. "Ron, can you hear water?"

Keeping still, Ron listened. "It sounds as though it's coming from below us. I bet it will be nice and cold if we can reach it."

Both boys immediately lay down, stretching out, and placed their ears against a paver – they could definitely hear water. Using his wand to lift the paver, Ron saw a small gushing stream that had hollowed out a path through the rock that ran under the school. Cupping his hands, he leant over the small ravine, scooping up the

icy cold water and took several draughts from the stream. "That's good."

Copying Ron, Justin leant over to imitate him, and after taking a few mouthfuls, he noticed something that stopped him. Something was glinting at him from what had to be a crevice just under the second paver. "Ron, what's that there?"

Kneeling back down, Ron looked at the spot where Justin was pointing. "I don't know. Let's move this second paver."

As Justin lifted the paver up with his wand, Ron grabbed the item and began to tremble. "It's Harry's Golden Snitch."

Kneeling down he cupped his hands again, but instead of scooping up water, he began to shout, "Harry! Hermione!" He was disappointed to get no response come back from inside the small opening, but he had half-hoped he would.

Justin got to his feet. "We need to tell Amicus." Both boys then set off at a run back towards where they knew Remus would be.

Remus turned as he heard Ron and Justin yelling at the top of their voices. At first he thought that the boys had done the impossible and found the missing children, but after quickly covering the gap between them, Remus discovered otherwise. Ron explained what they had found and held out his prize. "It's got Harry's initials on it."

Justin backed up Ron. "Harry asked Professor Sprout how to do it when I gave it to him after I caught it in the match against Ravenclaw. He usually carries it around in his pocket."

Remus rolled it over in his fingers. "Where did you find it?"

Ron explained what they had done, pointing back the way he had come. "This way."

Remus sent a messenger spell rushing out to alert Altus, and he then headed off towards the area Ron had mentioned. Just as the two boys had, he lay down and called out Harry's name, but as before no sound came back. Remus straightened up. "If Harry had this on him, then there must be some way through this stream into the Chamber. Stand back."

The two boys moved back as Remus blew a small hole into the side of the castle, revealing that the stream did flow from inside of the school. Then he turned back to them. "Wait here and tell Altus that I've gone in."

Both Ron and Justin badly wanted to follow Remus, but they were well aware that they might cause more trouble if they did so, and so they instead sat down to wait for Remus' partner to reach them.

Inside the hole, Remus discovered he would have to crawl on his belly through the water. After five minutes of crawling, he came across a grate, which he cast a loosening spell on before he yanked at it, ripping it out of the wall. After propping the grate up against the wall and squeezing by it, Remus then continued on his journey.

Inside the small area in which they were holed up, lying with his head on Hermione's lap, Harry thought he had heard a noise. "Hermione, did you hear that?"

As Harry scrambled up, Hermione also tiredly crooked her head. "I don't hear anything." Then she stiffened. "I did that time. You're right. Something's coming up the stream."

"Wand out," Harry warned, having loaned his wand to Hermione, who had been on watch while he had tried to get some sleep, using Hermione's lap as a pillow.

There were more splashing sounds and then suddenly a voice called out, "Harry! Hermione!"

Hermione burst into tears and a delighted Harry put his arms around her, yelling, "We're here."

A few minutes later, Remus called to them to get away from the wall, and a hole was blasted through. Harry watched as a very wet and dirty cloaked figure wriggled out of the hole.

As Remus straightened up, he noticed the fire in the doorway. "What's the fire for?"

He didn't get an answer as both children threw themselves at him, uncaring that they were getting wet, and Harry also gave into tears

of relief. Remus held them for a short time, before setting them away from him. "It's going to be okay."

"It's been terrible..." Hermione began in between her sniffles until she was stopped by Remus' head snapping up.

Remus had heard a strange noise coming from beyond the fire. "Something's out there."

Harry immediately leapt into action. "It's coming back."

Hermione aimed her wand at the small fire as she threw their last blanket onto it. "Inflammaré Maximus."

Harry then shouted a warning to Remus. "Look away."

Remus did as he was told, trusting that Harry had a good reason. He could hear hissing sounds, and he guessed that there must be some sort of snake outside. "What is it, Harry?"

"Shh," Harry snapped.

Remus fell silent, and soon the hissing sound began to fade as the snake slithered away. Harry let out a long breath, and he then turned to face Remus, and still not quite sure the Unspeakable was Remus, he asked, "Are you Amicus by any chance?"

Remus nodded. "Yes, I am, and I take it that was a snake."

"A Basilisk," Hermione told him. "It's been coming back time and time again, but we've been burning our books, a wooden bed frame and mattress we had in here and clothing to try and keep it away. We were starting to worry about what we were going to do if it came back and we'd run out."

"I was planning to destroy the doorway and then try and open up the passageway to the stream like you did," Harry said.

"Why didn't you try and follow the stream? Why wait?" Remus asked.

"We were afraid that if we did, even after blowing up the door, the Basilisk might somehow get out and follow us through, or that we

might bring down the ceiling into this room," Harry said. "Unlike you, I can't temper my spells."

Hermione immediately cottoned onto something Harry hadn't realized he had said. "How do you know he can temper his spells or even who he is?"

Remus, although impressed by Hermione's sharp observation, smoothly interjected, his voice filled with sarcasm, "I'd be a pretty ineffective Unspeakable if I couldn't temper my spells, and I met Harry during his training at BritAD."

Hermione blushed. "Sorry."

Remus could hear splashing yet again, and he guessed that Ron had passed the message on. He was right, and before long, Altus joined him. "I see you've found our missing children."

Remus nodded, and, after introducing the children, he then briefed Altus on the situation. "I was about to try disappearing with the children when I heard you."

But that failed, as did portkeying, something Harry told Remus would fail before he even attempted it, as he had already tried to use the ring Remus had given to escape from a dangerous situation.

Now that magical methods of escape had been ruled out, Remus knew he would have to get the children out the same way he had come in. But first he wanted to ensure that he wasn't interrupted as he did so. Turning to Altus he said, "I'm going to seal off that tunnel. I don't want that thing coming back while we're getting the children out. Shield us."

Altus did as Remus asked, warning the children to cover their ears. The controlled spell brought down the support above the door, and rocks tumbled to cover the doorway and extinguish the fire, leaving Remus, Altus and the children standing in a much smaller and darker area. As Hermione lit up the area with Harry's wand, Remus glanced behind him. "I'm afraid we're going to have to get out the same way I got in."

Hermione swallowed hard as she looked at the small, dark hole. "I don't like enclosed spaces."

Altus fished inside his pocket and assessed what he was carrying. "I can help with that, but first, are either of you in any pain?"

Harry nodded. "My leg is pretty sore."

After dealing with Harry, Altus then handed over a vial filled with purple liquid to Hermione. "It's calming potion." He then turned back to Harry. "Would you like one?"

Having lived most of his life in a tiny, cramped cupboard, Harry was used to small spaces and so he shook his head. "I just want to get out and eat something!"

"When did you last eat?" Altus asked.

"Two days ago," Hermione said. "We had a few supplies. We'd been trying to make them last."

Harry went to open his mouth to say something else, but Remus held up his hand. "We can talk more once we're out and you've been seen by healers."

Remus decided to send Altus down the tunnel first. "Altus, you lead; Harry, you go next; then Hermione; and I'll come up the rear in case Hermione gets stuck."

Just as Hermione disappeared into the dark tunnel, Remus heard a thumping sound. He had the sinking feeling that the Basilisk had decided it was going to try and get through. Not wanting to alarm Hermione though, he said nothing to the others as he too slipped into the watery tunnel.

Justin was hovering nervously and Ron was pacing frantically at the end of the tunnel, Remus' men wandering about beside them. Suddenly Justin heard a splash, and he spotted a cloaked figure coming out. "Did you find them?"

Justin received no verbal answer as Altus was pulled to his feet by a colleague, and he then turned and helped Harry out.

Ron gave a whooping yell and dashed over, almost knocking Harry over. "Harry, mate, I've been so worried." Justin too joined in the hug, the boys locked in a three-way hug.

Altus gently pushed the boys out of the way to help a white-faced Hermione out, who too was hugged by both boys, and then he helped Remus up.

Remus immediately turned and cast several spells: one to magically block off the tunnel; one to cause a small rock fall; and one to hide the fact that it had ever existed, before replacing the pavers over the stream. "There's a Basilisk in there and it was following us."

Hermione's legs gave out and she sank onto the ground. Remus immediately bent down and scooped her up, barking out an order at his men, "Head back to base. I'll take things from here." He turned to Altus. "You too."

Justin put a supporting arm around Harry's waist. "You look white."

"I'm not feeling so hot," Harry admitted, feeling a little giddy.

Ron was relieved to see his mother running towards them, tears running down her cheeks. "Mum, Harry needs help."

"Good to see you, Harry," Molly said as she slipped her own arm around Harry's waist, cupping his face gently, before smiling and helping Justin to steer Harry back inside of Hogwarts.

Harry was glad when the healer had finished checking him over. He was then passed a nutritional potion as well as a bowl of rather bland chicken soup, and dry bread. "Dry bread?"

The healer smiled. "Your stomach will be a little sensitive towards anything stronger at the moment. You can have something a little more palatable for your next meal."

Harry was surprised to discover that he could only manage half the meal before falling asleep. When he came to, it was to find a cloaked Remus sitting by his bedside. "What time is it?"

"Ten o'clock," Remus said as he passed Harry a cup of hot chocolate that he had placed a warming spell on. "Ron and Justin

have been taken back to the Burrow and Hermione's still asleep. Her parents are staying overnight in a guest suite."

Harry sipped the hot chocolate, his stomach grumbling. "Can I have something to eat?"

Remus reached behind him and grabbed a covered plate. "I had the house-elves make a huge pile of toasted cheese sandwiches."

Harry tucked in enthusiastically, only remembering after his third one to offer them to Remus. Remus was far from offended that it had taken Harry so long to offer the sandwiches up and also tucked in, between them polishing off the contents of the plate. Only then did Remus ask Harry about what had happened.

Harry shrugged. "I have no real idea how we ended up where we did. Everything's blurry."

Remus took out his wand. "How about if I try Legilimency on you?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't like the feeling of it."

"Then how about I grab my pensieve that I brought with me, and you try and concentrate on what you can remember," Remus suggested.

Harry agreed, and a short time later, his memory was deposited into the bowl. "Can I watch as well?"

After helping Harry out of bed, Remus grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him in with him.

Harry's Memory

Harry stormed out of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. "I can't believe me he gave me a detention because I didn't know how he had defeated the Jordanian Whiskered Demon – I'm not even sure there is something called that! And I'm even madder that he gave Hermione a detention for pointing it out."

"Then it probably doesn't exist, but it's mentioned in one of his books." Justin couldn't remember which one though; they all seemed to blend together after you had read several of them.

"Stupid bloody stupid books!" Harry grumbled.

"I take it you think they're stupid then?" Justin grinned at his friend.

Harry tried to stay mad and couldn't. "Yes, I think they're stupid." He sighed. "It's not fair. Parvati couldn't remember half the answers to his questions and he didn't put her in detention."

"She's a girl, Harry, who plays up to him," Justin reminded him. "And she apologizes so beautifully, whereas you scowl at him."

"He's an idiot," Harry said quite rightly.

"But he's also an idiot who's put you and Hermione in detention," Justin said as he opened the door to the library. "Come on, let's get his crummy homework done."

"That's another thing," Harry moaned as he slumped into the nearest chair. "Write three feet on his aspirations? What does that have to do with defense?"

"I don't know, but at least the answer is easy." Justin flipped open 'Magical Me'. "It's all in here."

Harry reluctantly began to list what Lockhart had claimed were his aspirations. He easily filled three feet, and that was without even making a dent in what was set out in 'Magical Me'. After he had finished, he leant back into his seat. "I suppose it could have been worse. He could have assigned me a detention during the last game of the season."

"See, that's the best way to look at it," Justin said, before looking over at Harry. "Why don't you head back to Hufflepuff? I'm going to be a little while longer yet."

Harry shook his head. "Nah, I'll wait for you."

And so once Justin had finished, the two boys headed off together.

The memory then stopped.

Harry turned a little sheepishly towards Remus. "I think that even now I might still be a little annoyed at getting that detention."

"That's why you connected this memory to the detention," Remus told Harry. "Let's continue to what I hope will be the evening of your detention."

Harry's second memory was exactly what Remus had hoped for, and he began the memory, starting right where Lockhart had arrived at Hufflepuff to collect Harry, none of the students being able to go anywhere on their own at that time. By the time he withdrew, Remus was almost unable to believe how fortunate Harry had been. "You are two very lucky children."

Harry shook his head. "I'm lucky Hermione knew what it was. I hate to think what would have happened otherwise."

"Don't underestimate your own part," Remus told him. "You initially saved your lives by distracting the Basilisk."

"But I'd never have known what to do if Hermione hadn't been there," Harry said, honestly believing that if Hermione had not been there he would have died. "She kept her head and was able to work out what to do. And speaking of what to do, what's going to happen to the Basilisk?"

"I'm going to have to take a team into the Chamber and destroy it," Remus said, having already decided on that particular course of action while Harry had slept.

Harry frowned at the idea. "Even though we didn't see anything, isn't there still another creature in the Chamber?"

"What makes you ask that, Harry?" Remus asked.

"Because something had to have ripped out Myrtle's heart, and I know from Hermione that a Basilisk doesn't kill like that," Harry said. "So if the Basilisk couldn't have killed her, then there had to have been another creature involved."

"Well spotted," Remus praised Harry. "And given what I discovered today, Bones is reopening Myrtle's case as well as reconsidering Meredith Harker's death, as like me, she now believes that the Basilisk was responsible for Meredith's death, and that it wasn't just a case of natural causes."

"Poor Meredith," Harry said as he remembered his fallen Housemate, before a thought occurred to him. "So could Myrtle have been killed by the Basilisk and then have had her heart ripped out by a person rather than by a creature?"

"That's one possibility," Remus said in a grave voice, before once again offering out praise. "It's a pity I can't award points. You have now offered up two very keen observations."

"I concur and can award points," Minerva said as she walked in and smiled at Harry. "Twenty points to Hufflepuff."

Harry was delighted, and then he frowned. "But school's over, Professor."

"They'll be awarded at the start of term," Minerva told him, before her face became grave. "I'm very sorry about what happened to you, Harry. We're still trying to track Lockhart down."

"He might be dead," Harry said.

Minerva's eyebrows shot up. "What makes you say that?"

Minerva was treated to Harry's second memory. "Unless we can get into the Chamber, we can't be sure whether Lockhart is dead or not."

"Amicus is going into the Chamber to kill the Basilisk," Harry told her.

"I'll need Harry to open up the entrance from inside the bathroom," Remus explained.

"How will you kill it?" Harry asked, before Minerva could ask anything else.

"We'll probably use a masking spell so that it can't see us and we can't see it, before throwing a rooster in," Remus said.

Having read the Defense book that Hermione had picked up from the mouth of the statue, Harry now understood why all the roosters had been killed. "And what then?"

"Then you and Miss Granger will be asked what you want to do with the proceeds of the sale from its body," Minerva said. "You're the ones who technically discovered the Basilisk."

Harry shrugged. "I don't want anything. You can put my half back into the school for books and stuff."

Given how he had been treated by both her and Dumbledore, Minerva was understandably choked at Harry's offer. "Thank you, Harry. That's most generous."

Harry gave Minerva a smile. "We were just unlucky, and the snake is in the school."

After squeezing Harry's hand, Minerva turned to Remus. "I'd like a word before you leave, Unspeakable Amicus."

Remus got up. "We can talk now."

When he got back, Remus told Harry that they had been discussing security. Harry was surprised. "But she doesn't know who you are, does she?"

Remus shook his head. "No, but she's concerned if we don't find Lockhart in the Chamber."

"If you do, why do you think he did it?" Harry asked.

Remus shrugged. "I honestly have no idea." Aware of how this might affect Harry, he tried to alleviate his fears. "If he's not down there, we'll be on the look-out for him, as will BritAD, so there's no need to worry. But to be honest, after viewing your memory, I believe that he's dead."

Harry felt awful thinking it, but he hoped so as well. He then yawned. "I suddenly feel sleepy again."

Remus got up. "I'd better be off. It's almost midnight, and even though you might not think it, you need your sleep."

The next morning when Harry awoke, this time it was to find Hermione sitting next to his bed. "Morning."

"I was hoping you'd wake up before I have to go," Hermione said. "Mummy said we need to go soon. I imagine that after what's happened, there's going to be some arguing about whether or not I can come back. And even though Mummy and Daddy don't get along, I have a horrible feeling they're both going to agree that returning will be a bad idea."

Harry grabbed his glasses and reached out to take Hermione's hand. "I hope you can come back."

Hermione laced her fingers through Harry's. "I hope so too." Then hearing her mother's voice, she got up, let go of Harry's hand, and kissed him on the cheek. "You were wonderful, Harry. I'll write to you."

Harry had to resist the urge to turn his head and kiss Hermione on the lips, and he experienced a pang of guilt as he thought about Hannah. "And I'll write back."

His thoughts were disturbed as Minerva came in, the girl he had just been thinking about in tow. "I have a visitor."

Hannah flew over to Harry's bed, tears running down her cheeks. "I thought you were dead, Harry."

Harry got out of the bed and hugged Hannah. "Apart from a leg injury, I'm fine, Hannah." He set her back from him, and gave her a smile. "And I need the bathroom."

Hannah gave a small giggle. "I'll wait here."

"I thought you might," Harry said as he limped to the bathroom, his leg sore despite the treatment he had received. The healer who had dealt with him had already apologized to him and warned him that he would be scarred because of the passage of time since receiving the injury. He was also warned that he might well end up with a limp. When Harry came back, he was ordered back into bed and given a nutritional potion, which made him pull a face. "That is disgusting."

"And you need it," the healer said. "Your breakfast will be along shortly."

After drinking the potion, Harry yawned. "Sorry, Hannah. I still feel wiped."

Hannah smiled. "I'd better go. I'd kiss you but that potion looked yucky."

"It was," Harry confirmed and he was given a kiss on his cheek. As he closed his eyes, he quashed the feeling that he had been glad that Hannah had not kissed him, especially given how badly he had wanted to kiss Hermione earlier, especially after she had said he was wonderful. More than a little confused by his feelings, Harry slipped into sleep again, his breakfast being placed under a heating spell to await his waking.

Next Chapter: A prisoner escapes from Azkaban; Remus receives a new assignment.

Chapter 34: The New Defense Teacher

Malfoy Manor

Draco Malfoy picked up the afternoon edition of the Daily Prophet and promptly spat tea all over the tablecloth.

Lucius turned a furious face to his son. "Manners, Draco!"

"Paper," Draco managed to cough out.

Lucius had by now read the paper. "I already know."

"But he's supposed to be dead," Draco squawked.

"Well, now he's back." Lucius' nose wrinkled at the dirty tablecloth. "Clean up that mess and then go pack. We're leaving at five."

"But Dobby can pack for me," Draco protested.

"Dobby didn't make a mess of the breakfast table." Lucius let Draco know this was punishment for letting his guard down. "Now go."

Draco hurriedly used a cleaning spell, something he believed to be far below him, and then he left the room.

Lucius checked the time and realized that if he didn't leave soon, he'd be late for his appointment.

Riddle House

Lucius looked around in dismay at the decrepit appearance of the house. "You can't use magic on this; it would degrade far too quickly. We definitely need an influx of money, which is something I can arrange."

"Severus said you would be able to do so." Tom walked into the dining room and over to the grandfather clock that had long since stopped ticking. "All of this should have been mine. I should have grown up in splendor instead of a dismal Muggle orphanage."

Lucius watched as Tom wound the mechanism to set the clock going. "It is quite an estate by Muggle standards."

"It's quite an estate even by wizarding standards." Tom had been to Lucius' home and knew only too well why Lucius had made the comment. "Then again, not everyone is as affluent as you."

"True," Lucius admitted. "And I have yet to use Narcissa's dowry. I was intending to give it to Draco when he marries, but under the circumstances, I do believe that he would be amenable if I used some of it to bring this place more in line with what you require."

Tom opened the first door he came to. "Strange place to have a bedroom, on the ground floor."

"It's of an adequate size." Lucius walked past Tom into the bathroom. "I do believe though that you will need to modernize."

"I'll probably alter everything as I'd prefer to have rooms away from this level, which means I need someone I can trust to undertake the work." Tom pulled a face at the antiquated bathroom. "As you are supplying the funding, can you also supply a renovator?"

"I know just the person." Lucius brushed imaginary dirt off of his shirt sleeve. "A designer named Lucy Viking. She's very discreet, a former Death Eater and a very close friend."

"Then make it so." Tom decided to entrust the updates to Lucius. "I want it done before Christmas."

"Do you think you'll have tracked Lord Voldemort down by then?" Lucius asked, having been made privy to Tom's plans.

"It doesn't make any difference if I do or not." Tom made his way further along the corridor. "I cannot abide living in Severus' home for much longer." Tom turned at the sound of a voice. "It looks as though we have company. Deal with it."

"Of course, my Lord." Lucius turned and headed in the noise's direction. "Good morning."

"Who let you in?" an old man demanded to know.

"I let myself in." Lucius could hear footsteps behind him. "I'm escorting the heir to this property around it."

"There is no heir," the old man snapped. "The Riddles are all dead and buried."

"Not this one." Tom stepped into the dim light. "I'm Tom Riddle. And you are?"

The old man paled at the young man in front of him, a man who was the spitting image of the former son of the master of Riddle House. "Are you a ghost?"

"No, I'm not," Tom said, rather amused by how frightened the man was. "Who did you think I was?"

"The Master's son," the old man managed to get past his terrified lips. "But he's been gone for years."

"So have I in a manner of speaking." Tom walked forward until he was in front of the man. "But now I'm back."

The old man recovered somewhat when he noticed how young Tom was, much younger than the former Riddle boy had been. "This is some sort of trick. You're too young to be him."

"Maybe so, but this is still my house and you still haven't told me your name," Tom said in a menacing voice.

"It's none of your business," the old man, who was named Frank, said as he turned away. "I'm going to call the police."

"I can't have that," Tom said softly. "Lucius, if you wouldn't mind?"

Lucius pulled out his wand as the old man turned around. "You should have stayed away, Muggle."

"Muggle?" Frank questioned the term. "Is that a new swear word?"

"It means that you're non-magical," Lucius said as he aimed his wand. "An affliction I don't suffer from. Avada Kedavra."

Frank didn't get a chance to defend himself as the spell hit him and he collapsed onto the ground. Tom sighed as he stepped over the body. "I'll need to have wards erected to hide this place. I can't have Muggles dropping in to investigate all of the time. I also think some sort of wards to repel our kind will also be necessary."

Lucius agreed. "I have a few connections in Gringotts – I can arrange for whatever you need."

Tom mulled it over. "I want the wards to be impenetrable by anyone not wearing a Dark Mark, and this property should also be undetectable by anyone magical and Muggle alike."

"So Class A wards," Lucius said, well aware of what would be best. "Malfoy Manor has similar protections as well as being unplotable."

"That would be perfect," Tom said, before glancing down at the Muggle that Lucius had just killed. "Deal with the body."

Lucius turned his wand on the body and within moments it had burnt to little more than ashes. "Are we finished here?"

"Yes," Tom nodded. "Contact your designer and then let me have her ideas when she has seen the place. And then arrange for wards to be erected."

Lucius didn't get a chance to respond as Tom vanished.

19th August 1994

Remus sighed as he looked over his latest orders as he walked up the corridor. "Don't laugh, Altus. I know I wanted to be a teacher when I first started at Uni, and I've done it before as a cover, but not for an entire bloody year."

"Come on, Amicus," Altus said, struggling to hide his smile. "How hard can it be? Just shout a lot and hand out detentions."

"But I'll be bored," Remus complained, having no wish to be forced into a teacher's position. "To say nothing of the water that has passed under the bridge between me and McGonagall."

"I wouldn't worry about that. I'm sure McGonagall will be glad to have you, especially now that her Defense teacher is not the person she thought he was," Altus told him, the investigative section of the Unspeakables having conveniently discovered genuine damning evidence that Professor Partridge was a former thief, one who had been skilful enough to hide his past from most people, but not from the crack investigative section of the Unspeakables. "So I take it you're going in as you and not undercover?"

"McGonagall knows about my problem, so I think as myself," Remus said confirming Altus' suspicions. "She'll just put two and two together and get four about my Unspeakable status if I don't."

"Then you'd better head out for your interview," Altus said, finally giving into his urge and beginning to laugh. "Perhaps she might even have an apple waiting for you."

"Fuck you!" Remus snapped as he reached the Unspeakables' apparition point, but even as he vanished, he could still hear Altus laughing.

Minerva was quite frank with Remus. "I have to be honest. You're the last person I expected to apply for this job."

"And yet you still interviewed me."

"I don't have anyone else for the position," Minerva said, omitting to mention that Severus had asked to be considered but, upon receiving Remus' application, she had decided to leave Severus where he was. "But before I do offer the Defense position to you, I need to know that you can put our past history over Harry behind us."

Remus wondered what she would say if she knew that he was Amicus. "I can if you can. We are, after all, both adults, and the true culprit is now exactly where he should be."

"Quite true," Minerva said, and she held out her hand. "In that case, Remus, welcome back to Hogwarts."

Remus forced a smile as he shook hands. "I'm glad to be back."

Just then an instrument on Minerva's desk began to chime and she issued a warning. "Severus is on his way up."

"This should be awkward," Remus muttered as he turned toward the door, having to hide a genuine smile at the shock that coursed over the Potions Master's face. "Good morning, Severus."

Severus ignored Remus. "What's he doing here?"

"He's the new Defense teacher." Minerva winced at the furious look on Severus' face. She knew that Severus would have some choice words about her decision later that day.

"Just keep him out of my way." Severus walked over to Minerva and handed over a sheet of parchment. "This is what I need for the stockroom."

"I'll requisition it this afternoon," Minerva promised.

"Thank you," Severus said and he exited the room, still not once talking directly to Remus.

"As I said, awkward," Remus murmured softly. "He still hates me, doesn't he?"

"I'm afraid so," Minerva said with dismay. "I've tried to get him to put the past behind him, but he can't."

"I almost killed him," Remus reminded Minerva, who was well aware of what had happened. "It's probably difficult for him to get beyond that."

"It wasn't your fault," Minerva said as she picked up Remus' class schedule and handed it to him. "And despite his dislike of you, right now I need you both."

"I'll do my best to keep out of his way," Remus said as he took the schedule and looked over it.

"I've made a few changes and thought it best if you get an early look at the schedule," Minerva told him. "Also if you want to change anything in your rooms, you can do so."

"I presume they're on the fourth floor," Remus said, being well aware of the layout of the school.

"They are," Minerva said. "And while you're here, I wanted to ask if you wouldn't mind covering the Express in September, as well as covering Christmas."

Remus wanted to do neither, but having little choice, he plastered on yet another fake smile and agreed to do as Minerva had requested, before excusing himself before she could think of anything else for him to do. "I'd better be off. I'm sure you have things to do."

Minerva did, and she shook Remus' hand again. "I'll see you in September, Remus."

"Headmistress." Remus inclined his head and then stalked out.

September 3rd 1994: Year Four

Neville reluctantly headed for Defense. "Please let Lupin turn out to be a better teacher than Lockhart was. Gran was well mad at my marks last year."

"He seemed really nice when I met him when I stayed at the Weasleys and he came to see Harry," Hannah said in Remus' defense. "And my mum said he was always nice at school."

Ron backed Hannah up. "He is nice. Mum and Dad really like him as well."

Neville rolled his eyes, not having yet met Remus formally. "He might be nice, but that still doesn't mean that he can teach."

"Well, at least he's probably not going to try and kill one of us," Hannah countered in a forceful voice.

"I should hope not, one nutter is enough," Neville said in a dry tone, and he followed his friends into class.

As soon as Neville walked into the classroom, he noticed the teacher's eyes fall upon him and his two classmates. He turned and whispered to Ron, "What's he looking at?"

"He probably knows that you're one of Harry's friends, and he definitely knows that I am," Ron whispered back and he sat down next to an already seated Hermione, with Hannah sitting behind them with Justin and Harry.

At the front of the classroom, Remus gave no indication that he had heard the children's conversation, merely transferring his attention to the other students who were piling into the classroom. Once everyone was seated, he began. "Good afternoon. My name is Professor Lupin, and I will be your Defense teacher for this year."

Ron flashed Remus a bright smile, one that Remus decided to make the most of, and so he pointed to Ron. "Mr. Weasley, would you please tell me in brief what you covered during last year?"

Numerous sniggers could be heard at the question, causing Remus to frown. "Would anyone care to enlighten me as to what is so amusing about my question?"

Justin was hardly surprised to see everyone looking anywhere but at the teacher, and he gave a sigh and put up his hand.

Remus pointed to him. "Mr. Finch-Fletchley?"

"What we learned about defense could be summed up in one word – nothing!"

Hermione turned around and berated her friend. "Justin, don't be so rude!"

"Miss Granger, would you concur?" Remus put Hermione on the spot, forcing her to turn around and face the front of the classroom.

"Not exactly. I did learn how to freeze and capture Cornish Pixies last year, Professor," Hermione announced to more sniggering.

"Anything else?" Remus asked.

Harry put up his hand. "I can tell you something else, Sir."

"So what did you learn, Mr. Potter?" Remus wondered how Harry would respond.

Harry grinned at Remus, well aware that he would do nothing even if Harry was totally honest. "Nothing about defense, Sir. But I did learn about Lockhart's ambitions, his favorite colors and how to deal with fame."

As the class burst out laughing, Remus' lips twitched involuntarily, and he struggled to hold back his own laughter at Harry's bluntness. After a second he responded, "Well, it looks as though I have my work cut out for me. We'll skip the introduction and the chapters on Cornish Pixies, so please turn to page 30."

The students dutifully opened their books at the required page to discover that it was a piece on the yeti, and several of them groaned. Remus knew exactly why. "There will be no playacting in this classroom, just study."

The class soon settled down, and they quickly discovered that unlike Lockhart, Remus actually knew what he was talking about. And so, at the end of the lesson, Neville was a bit happier leaving the classroom than when he had gone in. "At least he seems to have some idea how to teach, so I suppose he might be alright. But I still don't like the way he was looking at me."

"Neville, he barely looked at you all class, so give him a break," Hermione said, more than a little surprised at Neville's rudeness.

Neville glanced at Harry. "I know he's your sort of guardian and everything, but he did keep staring."

Hermione couldn't help being more than a little sarcastic. "He's probably a little star struck. I mean it's not every day he meets a boy who is friends with someone as famous as Harry."

Hannah, Harry, Justin and Ron burst out laughing as Neville snapped, "Ha, ha."

Still in the classroom, with his enhanced hearing Remus had heard everything, and he couldn't help but let out a shout of laughter at the comment that Hermione had made, the rather raucous laughter carrying to the children's ears.

Neville turned to his friends, his eyebrows raised. "He might be an okay teacher, but I have the feeling that he might be barking mad."

"Just because he laughed out loud doesn't mean that he's insane," Harry said, immediately defending Remus. "And he's a really good teacher. Look, I'll introduce you this weekend, and you can see that he's also a nice person."

Neville let out a sigh. "Well, I don't suppose he'll be fishing for information on you for a book like Lockhart, or that he'll be going mad and trying to kill you, so I suppose that would be okay." Neville shivered. "Then again if the position is cursed like they say it is, then maybe Lupin will go crazy at the end of the year."

Harry snorted. "Didn't seem to affect Snape."

Hannah grimaced as she thought about the Potions Master. "I wish it had been him instead of Lockhart who died."

"Don't we all?" Justin said, before changing the subject. "Come on, I'm starving, and it's supposed to be pork chops tonight."

"You're worse than Ron," Hermione chided her friend.

"I heard that," Ron yelled after the departing students.

Justin turned around grinning as he ran. "You were supposed to." He had to duck to miss the book Ron hurled at him.

Two Months Later

Luna got up and walked over to Neville. "Can you come and help me with something?"

"Of course I can," Neville said, although he thought it strange Luna was asking for his help of all people's. "What's up?"

"I want you to ask Susan out," Luna said straightforwardly. "I see you looking at her all the time."

Neville colored. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Luna gave Neville a sweet smile. "Yes you do, and I know that you and Susan will make a perfect couple."

"You're trying to marry us off?" Neville asked in alarm.

"No but I can see you like each other." Luna twirled her quill in the air, tickling Neville on the nose. "And I can see that she doesn't like me talking to you and playing like this."

Neville couldn't help but look behind him. Luna was right, Susan wasn't looking too happy. "What if I ask her out and she says no?"

"I knew you liked her!" Luna pounced on the implication of the question, ignoring the content of it. "And she definitely likes you. So go ask her out, and then come back here and pretend to help me with question ten about Dancing Daffodils."

Susan watched a red-faced Neville heading her way. "Did you help Luna?"

"Not yet." Neville could see that Hannah was listening intently. "Susan, can I talk to you?"

"Go ahead." Susan thought Neville was acting rather strangely.

"Um, alone?" Neville didn't want a witness in case Luna was wrong and Susan said no.

"Come to the back of the library." Susan got up, and then she headed towards one of the window seats at the back. "Okay, what have I done wrong?"

"Nothing," Neville said as he wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers. "I, uh, I wondered if you wanted to go to Hogsmeade with me on Sunday?"

"You mean to celebrate Bonfire Night?" Susan asked, not quite sure if Neville was asking her out on a date.

Turning redder than he already was, Neville shook his head. "Not exactly. I meant just the two of us."

"I'd love to," Susan responded and she uncrossed her fingers and smiled, before remembering that she had already made plans. "I totally forgot. I've already promised Katie from my potions class that I'd go to Hogsmeade with her."

That didn't bother Neville. "We can all go together."

That decided, the two of them returned to the desks at the front of the library, and Neville walked over to Luna. "I can help you with that problem now."

"Did you ask her?" Luna asked.

"Yes, and she said yes." Neville sat down. "But Katie Levinson is coming with us. Susan had already promised to go to Hogsmeade with her."

"I'm sure she'll let you two have some time alone," Luna said smiling. "And besides, I'm going with them as well."

"Susan didn't mention that." Neville pretended to check over Luna's work as he spoke.

"That's because she doesn't know yet." Luna grinned. "Now show me where I'm going wrong."

"This is where you're going wrong. It's Dancing Dahlias," Neville said, pointing out a genuine mistake that Luna had made, before he flashed the girl a quick smile. "And thank you."

"That's what friends are for," Luna said lightly as she squeezed Neville's knee. She gave a giggle as he jumped up and rejoined his friends.

Hermione frowned at her friend. "I saw that."

"I was just teasing him," Luna said as she gave a wicked smile, before resuming her usual pleasant look. "You know that in the end only a Hufflepuff will be right person for me." Justin had ended things with Luna not long after she came to from being petrified. Luna had surprised everyone by taking it rather well and declaring that she knew that she and Justin would still be friends.

Hermione watched Luna drift off into a daydream, ostensibly about her mysterious Hufflepuff. After waiting a few minutes for Luna to snap out of it, Hermione nudged her. "Luna, I suggest you

concentrate and get your homework done, otherwise you'll be twenty before you graduate!"

"Okay then." Luna quickly made the change Neville had suggested, and rolled up her parchment. "Finished. Can I go now?"

Hermione couldn't help herself and burst out laughing. "You are terrible."

"But you love me anyway." Luna blew her friend a kiss and skipped out of the library.

13th December 1994

Harry glanced over at his sort of guardian. "Remus, do you really have to spend all year here?"

Remus, of course, did. "Given that Bellatrix Lestrange has vanished off the radar, Ignotus feels that you'll be safer with me here."

Bellatrix had been taken ill at Azkaban about a month after Harry had been found in the Chamber. She had been moved to the hospital wing, and promptly vanished two days later after killing her guards, which had been the impetus behind Remus' orders. Unfortunately, no-one now had the faintest idea where she was. Harry was glad that Remus was there, but he also knew that having to take care of him like this was something of a tedious chore that Remus didn't want. "But you don't like teaching, do you?"

Remus had to be honest. "Not particularly, and you have no idea how glad I am that I didn't make this my chosen profession."

"At least you're a good teacher," Harry said as he grimaced. "Unlike Snape." He had found himself thinking about the Potions Master a lot since Bellatrix's escape. "Do you think Lestrange will come here and make contact with Snape?"

Remus shook his head. "Not if she has any sense she won't."

"But you said she seemed insane when you last saw her," Harry pointed out. "If she was, she might not even be thinking straight."

"Which is why I'm not leaving this position anytime soon," Remus said in a dull voice. Then, deciding that they both needed a diversion, he made a suggestion. "I tell you what, let's take our broomsticks out. But you can't stray from the school grounds and try not to overdo it on the broomstick as you won't be used to the speeds it can do."

"I won't stray," Harry promised before realizing what Remus' secondary warning meant. "You mean I can use it as the Vengeance?"

"Yes," Remus said as he grabbed his own broomstick out of the cupboard. "We can practice some quidditch moves, and I know you've been itching to try out the Wronski Feint, so I'll show you the ropes."

Harry's eyes widened. Now that he was back on the quidditch team as the main seeker, Justin making reserve, he was more than a little interested in anything that might give him an advantage, even though Hufflepuff had slaughtered Ravenclaw in their last match thanks to his own efforts and those of Cedric Diggory. "You can do it?"

"I took an advanced course as part of my training, and I also had to play quidditch when I was undercover teaching in the US," Remus revealed. "So I think the answer is yes."

Harry was now thoroughly diverted, not having realized that Remus had had to masquerade as a teacher before. "So where in the US did you teach?"

"Salem Girls' School. I was head of a house that was named Good House after Sarah Good, a young woman accused of being a witch in the Salem Witch Trials," Remus told Harry as they left his rooms and walked along the corridor towards Hufflepuff House. Although Remus was far from fond of teaching he still had a passion for history, and he was aware that Harry also rather liked hearing about times gone by, especially when it wasn't coming from Binns.

"Was she really a witch?" Harry asked, showing the interest that Remus had helped to promote.

Remus shook his head. "None of the individuals accused were."

Harry had a vague recollection from his mind-numbing history lessons with Binns that a wizarding community was already in existence at the time of the Trials, and so he questioned their lack of action. "So why did no-one rescue them?"

"Because the American magical world back then was very young; they were also very afraid of being discovered and persecuted themselves," Remus answered, before he stood aside to let Harry go into Hufflepuff House.

When Harry returned with his disguised broomstick, he picked up where they had left off. "Since the American magical world had real magic, it wasn't fair that innocent people had to die when they could have helped to save them."

"The wizarding world was just as frightened as the Muggle world of the witch hunts," Remus answered as they strode towards the exit. "And no-one was willing to risk their lives or risk revealing their world."

"Well, I think they were wrong," Harry declared vehemently. "If it had been me, I'd have done everything I could to help an innocent person."

"I do believe you would." Remus smiled as he changed the subject as they were now outdoors. "So are you ready to fly?"

Harry grinned in delight before looking around and checking for passersby. Spotting nobody, he tapped his broomstick with his wand. "Mutatis Vengeance."

Remus did the same to his own broomstick before they both then left the ground. When they had finished, just over two hours later, Harry was red-faced from the cold but he was grinning like an idiot. "You were really good."

Remus was well aware that he was pretty competent flyer but he had been impressed with how Harry had handled the broomstick, and he had to be honest and say that Harry was easily a much better flyer than he was. "You were pretty amazing yourself."

Harry grinned with happiness. "Thanks, but the broom helped."

"I think it was mostly you." Remus challenged Harry's statement before he spotted Harry's shiver. "However, I think we should go in now and get some hot chocolate. Even I'm freezing."

Harry quickly agreed, and soon the two of them were once again in Remus' rooms, both sipping fragrant hot chocolate, topped with marshmallows, Harry constantly glancing over at the broomstick with which he had fallen in love. Remus smiled when he caught his look. "You really loved it, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Harry sighed happily. "When you said how fast it was, I didn't think it would be so easy to handle."

"That would be because you're a natural flyer," Remus said, aware that his own quick reflexes were what he relied on to keep on top of a broomstick like the Vengeance, but Harry just seemed to be one with the broomstick, something Remus would never be. "And we'll try and fit in another session once we both have time again."

Harry gave another contented sigh. "Thanks." He looked over at the broomstick yet again. "Justin would love that."

Anything Remus might have said was interrupted by a tap at the window. "I think someone wants one of us."

"I'll get it." Harry put down what was left of his hot chocolate to open the window to the owl that had tapped.

As he did so, it flew to Remus, who took the letter and opened it up, read it and winced. Harry wondered what was wrong. "Has something happened?"

"Nothing important." Remus threw the letter onto the fireplace before sitting down and revealing the letter's contents. "It was just a 'Dear John' letter." When Harry looked askance at Remus, he explained, "It's a break-up letter. Julianne has written to tell me that she's met someone else."

Harry immediately offered his commiserations. "Sorry, Remus."

Remus gave Harry a wry smile. "It's hardly your fault. I kept on having to cancel our dates and so I'm hardly surprised she's finished with me."

"It's sort of my fault," Harry said. "You wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me."

"I was cancelling dates with her long before this assignment," Remus told Harry. "And it's not as if I was in love with her." Remus turned the focus back onto Harry. "Enough about my love life; how is your own coming along?"

Harry smiled widely. "Great. Hannah is really nice." Harry's guilt over wanting to kiss Hermione had abated as time had gone by, and any thoughts of finishing with Hannah had dissipated, Harry having decided that it had been the intense situation that had caused him to feel that way.

Smiling back, Remus moved onto a different couple. "Good, but did I hear correctly on the grapevine about Hermione turning down Dean Thomas?"

Harry was hardly surprised that Remus had heard – it had surprised most of the Gryffindor to discover that Dean had asked out Hermione and it had created quite the furor. "You did. Hermione has said that she's more interested in her studies than boys, and I think that might be right. She doesn't even bother going to Hogsmeade anymore." Harry had no idea that Hermione's refusal of Dean had had more to do with Harry than her work, nor did he know that her failure to attend Hogsmeade was also not work related.

Remus, however, suspected he knew the truth about Hogsmeade and filled in Harry. "I think it may have something to do with her parents; they rescinded her permission to leave the school when they heard about Lestrangle's escape."

"Hermione said that she had to beg to be allowed to return - even her dad didn't want her to come back this time," Harry said, remembering the tearstained letters he had received from Hermione before her parents had changed their mind about their daughter coming back to Hogwarts. "But she never said she couldn't go to Hogsmeade."

"She might have been embarrassed," Remus suggested, "or maybe she didn't want people feeling sorry for her and staying behind."

Harry went with the latter option. "I'd probably have offered to stay behind if I'd known, and Hermione would have hated it if she thought I was missing out because of her. I still wish she'd told me though."

"She's obviously too proud," Remus said. "And besides, with the extra classes she took in third year and has decided to continue, she probably really doesn't have enough time to spend going to Hogsmeade."

"I think she's mad," Harry shared, having dropped some of the extra classes he had taken on. "I'm only barely coping, and that's just taking Runes and Arithmancy."

"I think she believes she has something to prove as she's a Muggle-born," Remus said, "...to say nothing of the fact that she's an overachiever."

"I know, she's top of all of our classes except for Defense," Harry said, being the top student in Defense yet again.

Harry's comment brought Remus onto another subject change. "Speaking of Defense, I've arranged for you to spend the time up until Christmas Eve with me when you leave Hogwarts for Christmas holidays. I think it's time to speed up your training."

"Because of Lestrage?" Harry asked.

Remus nodded. "I know I said I wouldn't rush you, but I'd like for you to have a few more defensive spells in your arsenal than you have currently. If you'd known how to temper spells, you wouldn't have ended up in the Chamber for so long, but it's mainly because of Lestrage that I'm concerned."

Nerves as well as excitement immediately assailed Harry. "Will they be Dark spells?"

"Some will, some won't," Remus told him, having already drawn up a shortlist of the spells he thought would help Harry most in case of an emergency. "And as before, if you've changed your mind, I'm not going to push you to do this, even though I truly believe you need to be doing this."

"I also think I need to do this," Harry hurriedly assured Remus, rather excited at the thought of learning the verboten magic. "I'd rather be ready if Lestrage comes after me, as you think she might. And I'd like to be able to deal with a situation like the Chamber if it came up again, not that I expect it will."

"Neither do I, but I'm glad that you understand my pushing you," Remus said as he took Harry's mug. "Now I think you should head to dinner, and I'll see you in class tomorrow afternoon."

Harry picked up the broomstick that once again resembled a Nimbus 2001 and he headed off back to Hufflepuff, anxious for the Christmas holidays to arrive so that he could practice his defensive spells again.

France

Bellatrix bowed low before the repulsive, baby-like individual that was cradled in a chair. "Louis will be bringing your nourishment shortly, my Lord."

Voldemort expected nothing less. "Good, Bella. How goes your research?"

"I believe I may have found a ritual to bring you back." Bellatrix had been toiling relentlessly through the Lestrage family library ever since she had found her Master deep in the Albanian forests after she had escaped from Azkaban by using a temporary glamour to impersonate one of the guards she had killed, before using his stolen wand again, this time to apparate to the mainland the moment she had gone through the wards on the boat that was carrying her from her former prison.

"Well, do you ever intend to tell me about it?" Voldemort asked impatiently.

"I'm sorry, my Lord. I will do so immediately," Bellatrix apologized. "The ritual requires three things: bone from your father, an unwilling sacrifice of blood from an enemy and a willing sacrifice of flesh from your servant."

"And are you willing to sacrifice a piece of your flesh for me, Bella?" Voldemort queried, his voice hypnotically silky.

"Of course, my Lord," Bellatrix assured him, her tone fervent. "I would do anything for you."

Knowing Bellatrix as he did, Voldemort believed her, and he swiftly moved on. "Bone of my father will be easy to obtain; Severus knows where he is buried and you will contact him to arrange it."

"And what about blood of your enemy?" Bellatrix asked about the final component.

"Severus can obtain some of Potter's blood," Voldemort decided. "Dumbledore is a little out of my reach in Azkaban."

"Do you really think that Snape will be able to succeed?" Bellatrix asked. "He's..."

"You dare challenge my opinion, Bella?" Voldemort interrupted, believing in keeping his servants in line, even Bellatrix.

"No, my Lord," Bellatrix immediately lowered her head as she spoke.

"Good," Voldemort snapped. "Now go find that useless boy and bring me my milk."

"Yes, my Lord," Bellatrix said, before bowing and hurriedly leaving the room.

Next Chapter: Harry and Hermione's study date has unusual consequences

Chapter 35: A Rodent Riddle

January 19th 1995

Harry couldn't help but feel excited about the first practical lesson in DADA, even though he had spent hours at Remus' home practicing defensive spells up until Christmas Day. Realizing he had forgot to ask Remus something about the class, he put up his hand and responded when invited to do so. "Will we be having many practical lessons, Professor?"

"I have currently included at least two per month in my curriculum," Remus revealed, and he could see from the faces of the students that they obviously approved of this decision. "Now if you would all like to push the desks to one side, stow your bags and other personal belongings against the wall, and then stand in front of this cupboard."

The class hurried to do as instructed, some jostling going on as pupils tried to get prime position.

"Now what you are about to face is called a boggart." Remus stopped talking and tapped the tall oak cupboard that had two doors and several drawers below them. The class recoiled slightly when the cupboard began to shake. "For five points can anyone tell me what a boggart is?"

Hermione's hand shot up before most students had even registered the question, and she was therefore asked to answer. "A boggart is a shapeshifter that likes to live in dark, confined spaces, and it takes the form of the thing most feared by anyone who comes across it."

Remus smiled at Hermione's textbook answer. "Five points to Gryffindor. And now all of you should be aware that whatever frightens you the most, even if you don't realize that it does, will be the form the boggart will likely take."

This time Justin put up his hand. "Can it be killed?"

"It can be vanquished by the use of the Riddikulus spell," Remus answered, before going on to explain what the spell did. "You have to imagine your worst fear as something amusing and non-hostile

while incanting the spell. The wand movement is like thus."

Hermione watched Remus do the movement before copying him, earning her some sniggers. Remus was reminded very much of Lily Potter and he threw Hermione a lifeline. "If you would all like to copy Miss Granger, who has gotten the wand movement perfectly correct and earned Gryffindor another five points, and also say the word "Riddikulus" while you do so."

Hermione flashed her now favorite teacher a grateful smile, and began to do as he said, the class falling into line with her.

After a few minutes spent practicing, Remus decided that they were ready. "Please form a line and we will begin."

Now that they knew what they were up against, most of the class didn't want to go first, and Seamus Finnigan found himself pushed forward. Remus smiled encouragingly at him. "Now don't forget the wand movement and the spell, and most importantly don't forget to imagine your fear as something funny."

Seamus hoped no-one could see his knees knocking as Remus opened the door of the cupboard, particularly when a white garbed woman with floor length hair swept out. He had no idea that his face turned pasty white as he realized what it was when she opened her mouth to scream.

Remus called out to him, "The spell, Mr. Finnigan."

Seamus closed his eyes against the vision of the Banshee and imagined her as a mummy, her entire body, including her mouth, wrapped up tightly. "Riddikulus."

He opened his eyes up in time to see her fall to the floor, any chance to scream now gone. Remus winked at him. "Five points to Gryffindor. Now you, Miss Patil."

More than half of the class had tackled the boggart before it was Hannah's turn, and she braced herself, not quite sure whether she would be attacked by bats or bees, as she feared both. It turned out it was neither, as the vampire that Justin had just fitted with standard Muggle dentures turned into Hannah's baby brother David. But this

wasn't the happy smiling boy she was used to seeing, instead it was a lifeless body lying in a coffin. Hannah didn't hear Remus' gentle encouragement over the sound of her heartbeat and she dropped her wand and began to scream.

Next in line, Harry stepped forward, pushing Hannah to the side and taking her place. The toddler and coffin began to contort before it formed a very familiar figure, and Harry stepped back in shock as Petunia Dursley advanced on Harry and hissed, "Freak!" Like Hannah, Harry also forgot the spell he was supposed to be using, and he stepped backwards again as Petunia moved forward. "You're nothing but a freak whose hands are soaked in blood."

Before things could escalate, Remus dashed in front of Harry and the image of the vile woman vanished, transforming momentarily into a silvery-white sphere. As it did so, Remus dispatched it by turning it into large lump of cheese, which fell to the ground and was subsequently devoured by mice, before going 'pop' and vanishing completely. He then turned around to face the class. "I'm afraid that you weren't all quite as prepared as I would have liked. Please move the desks back and re-take your seats."

Still standing in line, Hermione's blood ran cold as she worked out what the silvery-white sphere was and what it meant. Shaking herself when Remus addressed the class, she mechanically did as he had asked but her mind was on what she was sure she now knew. Deciding that she needed to warn Harry about it, she forced herself to turn her attention back to what was going on at the front of the classroom, where Remus had sat Hannah down and was currently checking on her.

"Would you like to go the hospital wing?"

Hannah, who was pale, but no longer crying, shook her head. "No thank you, Professor. It was just a shock. I didn't expect to see David like that."

"Your baby brother," Remus said softly, remembering what Harry had said about the toddler.

"Yes," Hannah said. "Dad is always fussing over him, particularly if he has a cold or something."

Harry frowned in bewilderment. "But your dad's a doctor."

"I think sometimes that makes people worse, and given how many people currently have the flu, I'm not surprised Miss Abbott is so concerned." Remus fished in his pocket and pulled out a bar of chocolate, which he split into two and offered to the two children. "Chocolate always makes me feel better."

Harry immediately took the chocolate. "Thanks."

"No, thanks." Hannah shook her head. "I'm not that fond of chocolate."

Remus put Hannah's share back into his pocket, but not before snapping off a piece and eating it, chocolate being one of his weaknesses. "More for me then. Back to your seats."

After the lesson, Hannah told the others to go on and she waited for Harry to come out. "Can I talk to you?"

"Wait until everyone's gone," Harry said, and he then told Hermione he would see her later when she attempted to talk to him.

Harry and Hannah waited until they were the only two remaining in the corridor, before any of them said anything, Harry asking, "What do you want to talk to me about?"

"I wanted to thank you for what you did in the lesson," Hannah said, before leaning forward and kissing Harry, slowly and deliberately.

Harry blushed as they parted. "I'm not sure we should be doing this in the corridor."

Hannah giggled as she slipped her arm through Harry's. "But I like kissing you, especially when you've been such a knight in shining armor."

Harry was glad that she felt that way. "I wouldn't go that far, but I like kissing you too."

"So you've said before," Hannah told him, before she became serious. "Harry, do you want to talk about what you saw in class?"

Harry shook his head. "Not right now. Why spoil a perfect moment?" Harry hoped his diversionary question would prevent Hannah from pursuing the subject; he had already decided that he would talk about it with Justin later that day as he didn't feel comfortable discussing his aunt with Hannah.

Thoroughly diverted, Hannah grinned as Harry kissed her again, blushing when she saw Remus coming up the corridor. "I think we've been caught, Harry."

Remus deliberately turned and went the other way, making Harry smile. "I know Nev thought Remus was mad but I think he's brilliant. I couldn't imagine Lockhart ever leaving to allow us to do this."

Harry's mention of madness made Hannah ask Harry as to his thoughts on what had happened with Lockhart. "Doesn't it bother you that no-one knows why Lockhart went mad?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, and although I know it doesn't make me a nice person to say so, I was glad when I found out that Lockhart had died."

"Harry, he not only tried to kill you and the others, but he managed to kill Meredith Harker," Hannah reminded her boyfriend. "I'm glad he's dead, but I don't think that makes me horrible."

"You're not," Harry hurried to answer, and he stopped walking when he realized that they reached the entrance to the Great Hall. "Hannah, before we go in, I just want to say that I'm glad you're my girlfriend."

"I'm really glad too," Hannah said as she smiled brightly and went to walk into the Hall, only for Harry to stop her. "What is it?"

Harry still had one thing he needed to bring up. "Could you help me with Charms homework tonight? Hermione normally does it but I know she's busy."

"If you help me with my Defense homework tonight, then I will, or maybe I'll hold you to ransom for more kisses," Hannah announced. Then she grinned. "Or perhaps I should be like Colin Creevey and ask for more than that."

Just as he had when Pansy Parkinson had helped save him, Harry had felt that he owed both Colin and Susan a life debt for their help in identifying the entrance to the Chamber, which had eventually led to his and Hermione's rescue. Susan had initially refused any such thing from either of the children but as she had technically saved his life, Harry had pointed out that under the pure-blood rules that had governed her gift of justice, her family was now free of any debt to him, although the cufflinks would remain his. However, Colin had used the opportunity to demand that Harry first pose for pictures with him and then go into Hogsmeade with him to have lunch together, both of which to Harry had had to reluctantly agree. Harry had been more than relieved when he had fulfilled his part of the deal.

Harry shuddered. "I hope not."

Hannah grinned. "Then we can settle on a simple exchange and maybe a few kisses."

Harry wanted to kiss Hannah at that moment but with an audience he decided he could wait. "Maybe, but right now I'm hungry."

"Then we'll wait until later." Hannah slipped her arm through Harry's and gently tugged him into the Great Hall.

February 18th 1995

Harry pointed to the rune on the last page. "I can't get this right. It looks like Ehwaz but I know it's not."

Bending over Harry, Hermione identified the rune. "It's Mannaz." She stepped backwards when the rat on Harry's shoulder rose up, Harry having taken him out of his cage as the rat had been almost been freaking out inside of it, only calming when it was on Harry's person. "Did you have to bring Scabbers to study?"

Harry reminded Hermione of where the rat's master was. "Ron's playing in a match in case you've forgotten."

"He could have left Scabbers in his bedroom." Hermione gave the rat another look of distaste as she returned to her seat, the two children having taken up Remus' offer of using his rooms to do their homework in comfort, given that everyone seemed to be outside, including Remus himself.

"He's a little worried that Scabbers might be a tad off color again." Harry had readily agreed to take the rat with him as he only had one piece of work on runes to do, and he had eschewed watching the match in favor of picking Hermione's brains, as she had decided it was too cold to watch a game she fully expected Gryffindor to win anyway.

"I'd say he's more than a little off color; he looks about ready to be put down." Hermione gave a shudder as she looked at the rat, which had lost weight, had big patches of skin showing through where fur had dropped out and kept scratching itself.

"Ron would be heartbroken if that happened." Harry lifted the rat off his shoulder and placed it on the desk, where it scanned the room with its beady eyes, before shifting slightly closer to Harry again. As it did so, Harry noticed Nagini staring hungrily at it. "Don't even think about it."

"But I am hungry," Nagini complained.

Hermione wasn't bothered by Harry's speaking Parseltongue, but she frowned nevertheless. "And why did you bring Nagini to a study session? She's most definitely not ill."

Harry looked a little sheepish. "She complained that I was letting Hedwig come with me."

Hedwig gave a rare hoot at the sound of her name. Since she had been reunited with Harry, just like Justin, she had spent most of her time at his side, eschewing the owlery in favor of staying with her master.

Harry then made a good point as he pointed at the ugly cat that Hermione had been bought by her parents. "Anyway, you've brought Crookshanks along."

"He keeps scratching the other girls' beds," Hermione said as she picked up the cat and scratched him behind his ears. "And he gets bored on his own."

"Fine but just keep him away from Scabbers," Harry warned. "He's already tried to have a go at him."

"This would be far easier if Hannah, Susan and Luna had agreed to study with us instead of tagging after the boys; they could have done a little animal sitting themselves," Hermione said as she placed Crookshanks back in his basket. "Be a good Crookshanks."

Harry refrained from rolling his eyes as Hermione tenderly tucked the cat up with a blanket. "Hannah likes quidditch, Susan wanted to see the match with Neville, and Luna being Luna, she wants to make eyes at Remus."

Hermione shook her head. "Professor Lupin must know that she's gaga over him, the way Luna moons around him. I don't know why he puts up with her behavior sometimes."

"Because he knows that it's just a crush, even if it is a humongous one," Harry said, him and Remus having already talked about it. "And it could be worse, it could be someone like Lockhart she's crushing on."

Hermione had the decency to blush, not just because of her former crush on Lockhart but also because of her current one. "I know I was wrong about Lockhart, just like I was wrong about Professor Lupin being a danger to you."

Having finally been able to share her fears with Harry the day after the boggart lesson, Harry had immediately denied what Hermione suspected, until she had produced all of the evidence she had pulled together. So afraid of what Hermione might do with this knowledge, Harry had gone to Remus, who had told him that he would speak to Hermione.

Once she had discovered she had been right and that Harry had known, Hermione had been annoyed that Harry had lied about knowing that Remus was a werewolf. But Remus had defended Harry, saying that it had not been Harry's secret to share, before explaining to Hermione about how he had been bitten as a child as well as the precautions he now took. Even so, Hermione had felt uncomfortable when Remus had offered his rooms for her to study in comfort while everyone else watched the quidditch match. It was only Harry's offer to keep her company that had led her to accept, Harry also being a little behind in his work due to his additional private lessons with Remus and quidditch practice.

Then, aware he should get on with his own homework, Harry looked back down at the page and sighed. "I still can't work this out even knowing that this is Mannaz."

Hermione moved forward once more, and as she reached out to point to a symbol that Harry should have been transposing, she accidentally knocked Scabbers across table and onto the floor. "Drat."

It was too much of a temptation for Nagini and Crookshanks, Nagini slithering off the table just as Crookshanks shook free of her blanket. Almost as one the pair shot forward in a race to reach their prize, a very frightened Scabbers.

Harry span around in his chair as the rat bolted across the floor, and he yelled at Hermione, "Grab Crookshanks."

Hermione dove forward at the same time as Harry, both trying to get to Scabbers, and the pair of them ended up on the floor, their heads smacking sharply together. Unfortunately their mishap meant that they were both too late to save Scabbers, and it was Nagini who won the race between the two animals, Hermione managing to grab Crookshanks by his tail. Free of interference, Nagini reared up and sank her fangs into the rat.

Despite the fact that he was probably too late, Harry still hissed out a loud 'NO!' hoping to save Scabbers from his mealtime fate. "Nagini, drop him."

Nagini purposely ignored Harry. Being a snake, she didn't understand about homework and the pressure it put on Harry, and she was therefore more than a little resentful that Harry had been neglecting her, and so she continued with her feast.

On the floor, Hermione let go of Crookshanks, who slowly sauntered back to his basket, and she then closed her eyes and lay back on the floor. "Now how is Ron going to feel about the condition of his rat?"

Harry dropped his head onto the floor as well. "Mad at me, I think. I should never have let Nagini out of her cage."

"You couldn't have known she would disobey you." Hermione lifted her head and tentatively opened one eye. "Yuk."

Harry looked over at Nagini where the back end of the rat was slowly disappearing down her throat, and he wagged his finger at her. "You are not being allowed out again anytime soon."

Nagini couldn't answer, her mouth full, but if she could have laughed she would have. She had what she wanted and she would worry about Harry's warning later. Harry groaned as he lay back down. "I'm not looking forward to telling Ron."

"I'll tell him with you," Hermione offered. "And then I had better go to see Madam Pomfrey." Hermione touched her sore head. "You have one solid skull."

Even though his own head felt fine, Harry realized he must have hurt Hermione, so he rolled over and leant over her to check the damage. "Let me take a look." Harry then gently parted Hermione's hair, his fingers softly brushing over the bright red lump that was already forming. "You've got quite a beauty there."

Suddenly the door burst open and Harry pulled his wand without thinking. Ron backed up, his hands held out in front of him. "Whoa, it's just us, mate."

Almost running into Ron, Hannah's voice was strangled as she asked, "What are you doing on the floor with Hermione?"

Harry didn't get a chance to answer as Neville, who was right behind Ron with Susan and Luna, shouted out, "We won and Ron caught the snitch!"

As Harry helped Hermione up, Hannah noticed the lump on her forehead, and she was immediately embarrassed that she had thought that her boyfriend had been cheating on her. "Are you all right, Hermione?"

"Not exactly," Hermione said as she shook her head and winced. "I got this trying to stop Crookshanks going after Scabbers."

Ron looked around the room. "Where is Scabbers?"

"I'm afraid Nagini ate him," Harry said hesitantly. "I'm so sorry."

"How could this have happened?" Ron asked as he slumped into a chair.

Hermione and Harry told the group the full story, with both of them taking the blame. "We both tried to save him, but it was too late. We'll get you another rat."

Ron shook his head. "Don't bother. He was old anyway." His face crumpled slightly. "Excuse me."

Neville was about to follow Ron out, but stayed behind to make a suggestion. "I don't think you should get Ron another rat. He's always wanted an owl."

"How do you know that?" Hermione asked, as she sat down.

"He's always moaning about how Scabbers is really useless," Neville told them. "And that he would rather have had an owl."

"Ron didn't look as though he thought Scabbers was useless just then," Hermione observed. "He was really upset, but I think your suggestion is a good idea."

Harry decided that his best option would be to simply go out and buy an owl, rather than asking Ron if he wanted one. "I'll ask Remus for a catalogue."

"I'd better stay with you," Hermione said. "It's only fair I contribute half."

No longer worrying about Harry and Hermione being alone together, Hannah kissed Harry's cheek and left the room, following Neville and the others out. "See you later, Harry."

"I shouldn't be too long," Harry said, flashing his girlfriend a smile before sitting down next to Hermione. "Don't you think you should get that looked at before we ask about the catalogue?"

"A catalogue for what?" Remus asked, as he sniffed the air as he walked in.

"Nagini killed Scabbers," Harry quickly said. "So we want to buy Ron an owl."

More observant than Hannah, Remus immediately noticed Hermione's head. "That looks painful."

"We hit heads," Harry said, "but Hermione got the worst of it."

Remus absently took out his wand and cast a healing spell on Hermione's head, even as he was still sniffing the air. "That should be okay. Now about that catalogue: I can help you sort something..." He broke off to sniff the air once more.

"What's up?" Harry asked, exchanging a confused look with Hermione.

"It's a smell I can't place," Remus said in explanation, before he headed into his kitchen. "I've smelt it on Ron before but this time it seems so much stronger."

"It could be that disgusting aftershave he keeps wearing," Harry said, grinning. "He thinks Parvati sent it to him when really it was Fred and George. It's got cat repellent in it."

Remus gave a shout of laughter, unable to help himself. "I sometimes think those boys are worse than I ever was." He noticed Hermione packing up. "Have you both finished?"

Hermione shook her head, and so she and Harry were told to stay where they were and finish their homework. However, both children could not help but notice that Remus kept on sniffing the air. In the end, as he had finished his homework, Harry turned around, and asked, "You can still smell it?"

"Yes, and what's irritating me most is that I can't place what it is that I'm smelling. I know it's not cat repellent, but I don't know what it is," Remus said in frustration.

Harry sat down opposite Remus to wait for Hermione to finish up her homework as she would be far from happy if he left her alone with Remus, even given that she had accepted what her Professor was. "Perhaps it's all of the animal smells." Hedwig had now left but

Nagini was locked back in her cage and Crookshanks was sleeping in her basket.

Hermione swung around in her chair. "Or perhaps you can smell what Nagini did to Scabbers."

It was only then that Remus realized he had no idea how Nagini had killed Scabbers or what Scabbers was. "Did she bite this Scabbers or crush him?"

"She bit him and then ate him."

Hermione shuddered. "I can still see his furry body disappearing down her throat in my mind, tail and all."

"He was a mouse?" Remus asked.

"A rat," Hermione answered. "And even though he was really, really old, Ron is really cut up about it."

Remus remembered Molly mentioning a rat some years ago. "This isn't the same Scabbers that used to belong to Percy, is it?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, Ron said that he's been in the family for about ten years or something like that."

Remus whistled. "Ron's lucky that Scabbers lasted that long; most rats, even magical ones die after about six years." He then got up and scowled as he sniffed the air again, before he turned back to look at Harry. "You've already said you're going to replace him, so I wouldn't feel too guilty. It's only natural for a snake like Nagini to go after Scabbers, and as you said, he was old."

"And sickly and he was missing a toe," Hermione added, trying to make Harry feel better. "And..."

She got no further as Remus tersely interrupted, "Which toe?"

"One from his right front paw," Harry interjected, having heard Ron complain that everything he ever got was usually secondhand and damaged, even his pet.

"It can't be," Remus said, before he turned to Harry and Hermione. "Stay here until I get back."

Hermione watched as Remus grabbed his broomstick and ran out of the room. "What's going on?"

Harry was just as confused as Hermione. "I don't know."

Remus returned less than twenty minutes later, his hair windswept. He placed a bowl on the table and locked his door. "Harry, I need to see a memory of Scabbers."

"Okay," Harry said as Remus withdrew his wand and touched it to Harry's forehead.

Hermione stared in fascination as a strange stream of what looked like protoplasm was withdrawn from Harry's head. "What are you doing, Professor?"

"Withdrawing my memory to put in that bowl," Harry explained. "It's called a pensieve." He then grabbed her hand and followed Remus into the pensieve to view the memory.

Remus said nothing as he watched the memory of Nagini attacking Scabbers. He ran it back several times, freezing it on the part where the rat was on Harry's shoulder. When he finally spoke, he was pale. "This should be impossible."

"What should?" Harry asked, more than a little confused.

"Peter Pettigrew had a scar on his back, just below his shoulder, where he injured it as a boy and it wasn't healed in time," Remus said, pointing at the front of the rat. "And he also had a kink in his tail, just like Scabbers did, and of course, a claw missing from the same spot that Peter lost his finger."

Both Harry and Hermione moved closer to the frozen visage and peered at the rat. Hermione gasped. "The rat has a scar on its back..."

Harry finished her sentence. "...and a kink in his tail." He glanced over at a still pale Remus. "But why would Peter hide and pretend to be Scabbers?"

Remus pulled both children out of the pensieve as he responded, "I don't know."

"Is this the same Peter you mentioned was killed by Sirius Black?" Hermione asked Harry.

Harry nodded. "Yeah."

"Perhaps he was frightened that Black would escape and come after him," Hermione suggested.

"Why didn't he come to me after Sirius was imprisoned?" Remus asked, more than a little perplexed by what he had uncovered.

"You did say that you fell under suspicion at the time because you were a werewolf," Harry reminded him. "Perhaps Peter thought you were in league with Black and would kill him if he came forward."

This brought to mind another problem, one that Hermione brought up. "If Scabbers was this Peter, then why didn't he change when Nagini was attacking him?"

Neither Harry nor Remus could answer this, and Remus decided he had to leave Hogwarts yet again. "I don't know but I do know that I need to report this to Ignotus."

"Isn't Ignotus the head of the Unspeakables?" Hermione questioned.

Remus scowled as Harry foresaw what he was also about to do and stood in front of Hermione. "Please let her keep her memories."

Hermione paled as she saw the wand that Remus had drawn without her noticing. "You were going to take my memories away?"

Remus nodded. "I have to."

Harry remained where he was. "Please, Remus. I really want someone I can talk to about everything, and you're not always around."

Letting out a long sigh, Remus tapped his wand against his leg. "I'll have to get permission to make this permanent but while I'm gone

you can fill Hermione in." He then touched his wand to his heart. "I, Remus John Lupin, free Harry James Potter from his oath to remain silent about anything we have discussed so that he can speak freely to Hermione Granger." As a white light covered Harry, rather than Remus this time, Remus holstered his wand. "If the permission is refused though, I will have to obliviate her."

Harry understood this and nodded. "Thanks."

"I'll be back as soon as I can. Do not leave these rooms, no matter what," Remus warned as he picked up the pensieve.

It was almost two hours later when he returned, and it was with good news. "Ignotus has agreed that Hermione can keep her memories, although he wasn't very happy about it."

Hermione was both relieved and delighted, her interest more than a little piqued by what Harry had told her. "I couldn't believe it when Harry said he was an Unspeakable."

"I take it that unlike when I first told Harry, you have some idea what being an Unspeakable means, especially given you knew who Ignotus is," Remus said as he placed his pensieve on the table.

Hermione's head bobbed up and down. "After seeing an Unspeakable when Madam Bones came to interview me before Harry's relatives' trial, I looked them up."

"That was me," Remus revealed, as he presumed quite rightly that Harry had forgot to tell her that.

Hermione was not exactly surprised, and she had quite a few questions for Remus that Harry had been unable to satisfy, all of which Remus patiently answered.

Harry eventually got fed up and interrupted. "What did Ignotus think about Scabbers?"

"After viewing my own memories of Peter's Animagus form and your memory, he agrees that it was likely that that was Peter," Remus said heavily.

Now that it had been confirmed, Hermione blanched. "What a horrible way to die."

Harry agreed, but he was still more than a little confused by Peter's failure to identify himself. "Yeah, but he didn't have to. He could have told someone who he was and they would have helped him."

"Ignotus believes that perhaps Peter had become locked in his Animagus form and couldn't change back," Remus said, filling the two children in on some of the discussion he had had. "I can remember Molly saying that the twins were forever trying to experiment on Scabbers and perhaps something happened when they did."

Remus was actually right; the twins had managed to brew up a potion in their second year that they have believed would turn Scabbers into a small ferret but it had failed, or so they thought. Instead it had locked Peter into his Animagus form.

After batting some ideas back and forth, Remus noted that it was time for curfew. "I'll escort you both back to your houses."

Hermione's stomach rumbled. "We missed dinner."

Remus realized he had forgotten about it. "We'll make an unscheduled stop then."

Hermione was a little scandalized when Remus took them to the kitchens, but her indignation ended as she spotted the strange creatures at work there. "What are they?"

"House-elves," Harry answered. "Remus has one."

One of the house-elves rushed over. "What can Mishka get for Mr. Remus?"

"We've all missed dinner," Remus said. "So I'd like three baskets of food."

Hermione watched as the house-elves rushed around to fill three baskets with a selection of cold meats, bread, butter, fruit, several beverages and some apple pie. "There's enough to feed of all us in just one basket."

"I'm sure your roommates would probably be happy to help you out if you can't eat it all," Remus said as he picked up his basket.

Hermione shook her head. "I doubt it. They're always going on about their figures."

"Then Ron probably will," Harry told her. "Just like Justin, he's always ready to eat."

Hermione was handed a basket and she smiled nicely at Mishka. "Thank you so much."

Mishka trembled a little. "Missy is very kind in thanking Mishka."

"It's just good manners," Hermione responded and she turned away, Harry and Remus following her. On reaching her dorm, she realized something. "You didn't ask me to swear an oath. I know from what you said to Harry that you must have made him do so."

Remus felt a little embarrassed that he had forgotten in his turmoil over Peter. "I forgot."

"Should I do it now?" Hermione asked.

Remus nodded and watched as Hermione made an oath, before Remus made a counter-oath similar to the one he had made for Harry. Unlike Harry, Hermione immediately guessed why Remus had made the counter-oath. "Thanks. It's nice to know that I won't die if I make a slip-up, although I doubt that I will."

"I'm quite sure you won't," Remus said, and he and Harry both bid her goodnight and headed off towards Hufflepuff. "You do realize that I'm going to be in very big trouble if Hermione does slip up. Ignotus was not exactly happy with your request. It's only because you're the Boy Who Lived that he said yes."

Harry hated using his alter ego to get what he wanted, but this time he was grateful for it. "I need more than you I can talk to when I'm here. You won't always be around in school and Hermione will."

"I understand the pressure you're under," Remus replied. "And that's another reason why you're being allowed to have Hermione as a

confidante, although I'm surprised you didn't ask for Hannah to be let in on the secret."

Harry looked around before answering. "I really like Hannah, Remus, a lot. But even though it sounds bad, Hermione is one of the friends I have who I trust totally to keep a secret, Justin and Ron being the other ones."

Remus had expected Harry to include Luna. "So you don't trust Luna or Susan?"

"I do but Luna has a bad habit of saying things she's not supposed to if she thinks it will help me, and Susan is loose lipped, although she has gotten much better lately," Harry said. "But I'm mostly not telling Susan because she's going out with Neville, who I honestly can't say I trust."

Remus could understand this. "Then you should stick to your guns, but you should know that I can't include Justin or Ron as much as I would like to. Hermione is the exception just like you were."

Harry accepted this. "That's okay, but will Hermione be able to be like me?"

Remus guessed immediately he was talking about Harry's status as an Unspeakable, and he shook his head. "As I've just said, you really were an exception, Harry, and Hermione's damned lucky she's been allowed to keep her memories."

Harry subsided. "I was just hoping."

"Sorry, but you really are an exception," Remus told him, as he felt Harry's disappointment.

Harry understood that but he had a question. "Why did you forget to ask for an oath? Was it because of Peter?"

Remus nodded. "I hate mysteries, especially unsolved ones, and I let my mind wander."

"Why don't you question Black again?" Harry asked.

"I'm going to but Ignotus doesn't feel it's an urgent matter," Remus told him. "So the day after we leave here for Easter, you'll finally get a chance to see Azkaban."

Harry's eyes lit up – ever since Ron had been to Azkaban, Harry had wanted to visit as well, even though Remus had assured him that it was an awful place. "Really?"

"It's not nice, Harry," Remus reminded him as he drew to a halt and let the privacy bubble he had been using since leaving his room fail. "But we'll talk more about it at Easter. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Harry said and disappeared through the doorway.

Azkaban - Easter

Sirius once again found himself being questioned by an Unspeakable, who he suspected was the same one who had taken him to task over Harry's disappearance, although he had no idea who the shorter Unspeakable was. "I know you can't be here to talk about Harry this time, so what do you want?"

Remus indicated that Harry should sit before doing the same. "To talk to you about a man named Peter Pettigrew."

Sirius looked hopeful as he responded, "Have you found him?"

"Considering you killed him, that would be very difficult," Remus said, not giving anything away.

Sirius' face contorted into anger. "As I've tried telling everyone who will listen, I did nothing of the sort, and if you would all take your heads from up your arses and give me a proper trial, I'll prove it."

"I've seen the memory of that day," Remus told him, having done so. "And if, as you say, he didn't die, then how do you suppose he escaped the fate you had in mind for him?"

Sirius leant forward in his chains. "I don't know but what I do know is that I didn't bloody well kill him."

Remus was completely unaffected by Sirius' anger. "Let's put aside that your supposed innocence for the moment and instead I'd like

you to try to answer my question as to how Pettigrew escaped his fate."

Sirius sank back into his seat and decided to try to use Remus' interest to his benefit. "What's it worth if I answer your question?"

"Certainly not another trial," Remus responded, guessing this was what Sirius was angling after. "But I would be willing to barter up to a point if you agree to answer my question."

"How about a move to the less secure area of Azkaban?" Sirius asked, not expecting Remus to say yes.

He didn't. "Absolutely not."

Not willing to push his luck too far, Sirius downgraded his request quite considerably. "In that case I'd like a daily newspaper, some quality clothing and bedding, some nice toiletries and the same food that my warders receive."

Sirius had always been a bit vain about his appearance, so Remus was totally unsurprised by the clothing and toiletries request, and the newspaper and food were not exactly asking for much. He therefore decided to grant Sirius' request. "Agreed. Now please answer the question."

"Pettigrew was an unregistered rat Animagus," Sirius revealed, having no idea that Remus already knew this. "I believe he blew off his own finger to fake his death and disappeared into the sewers, where he belongs."

"And why would he do such a thing?" Remus asked.

"Because he was the Potters' secret-keeper and not me," Sirius said tiredly. "I know you don't believe me but it's true." He then lifted his head up to peer at where the cloaked figure's face should be. "Why are you so interested in Pettigrew anyway?"

"That is none of your business," Remus said as he climbed to his feet, indicating that Harry should again follow. "This interview is terminated. I'll arrange for the items we agreed upon."

"Come again," Sirius said, leaning back in his chair. "And if you need to know anything else, I'll be glad to share the information for a price."

Remus ignored the comment and left. Once on the boat back to the mainland, he put up a privacy bubble and spoke to Harry. "He believes he's right about his assumption, and I could detect no lie when he said he wasn't your parents' secret-keeper."

Not able to contemplate that it might be the truth, Harry shook his head. "Look at what he did to Snape, Remus. Black is evil and he's just trying to twist things."

Remus sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know what to think right now, and I need to review the memory we have of the attack on Peter."

"Can I see it?" Harry asked.

"Let's go see it now," Remus decided and he shivered as they passed through the wards that surrounded Azkaban Island. "We can apparate from here."

Harry took Remus' arm and let him disapparate them. Remus had promised to give him apparition lessons during Easter but since the holiday had only just begun, as yet he had no idea how to do so.

After an hour, Harry had watched the memory closely as many times as Remus and the head of the Unspeakables, Ignotus, had, and, just like them, he still couldn't see if Peter had done as Sirius had suggested. "I think Black was lying."

"I don't know," Remus said, his face looking strained.

Ignotus made a suggestion. "Given the possible resurgence of Pettigrew, I believe that the only fair way to deal with this is for a trial to take place and for Black to be questioned under Veritaserum. By now any immunity he once possessed should have worn off."

"Veritaserum, that's the truth drug, isn't it?" Harry asked.

Remus nodded. "Yes. A trial wasn't held when Black was thought to have killed Peter as most Death Eaters are believed to be immune to it, and given the evidence, it was an open and shut case."

"He didn't get a trial?" Harry asked in surprise. "But even my relatives got one and they were as guilty as Black."

"As I've told you on several occasions, the wizarding world is a very different kettle of fish from the Muggle one," Remus said. "Particularly in how our laws work."

"And even though it's a little late, Black will now have to have a trial," Ignotus declared. "I'll speak to Madam Bones about setting one up."

"But he's guilty," Harry snapped, hating the thought that his family's killer might walk free. "Remus said it was an open and shut case."

"That was before the new evidence of Pettigrew's possible survival was brought to light," Ignotus pointed out. "And if that happens, then a trial must be granted. I'm sorry, Harry, but while I understand your distress, I have to follow the law."

Harry visibly sagged. "I understand."

Ignotus decided to dismiss Harry. "Remus, take Harry home. I'll deal with setting everything up for the trial."

Next Chapter: Harry sees a terrible vision; Minerva McGonagall runs afoul of Bellatrix Lestrange

Chapter 36: A Failed Ritual

Cornelius Fudge was once again conducting the ritual of visiting Azkaban. When they arrived at Albus Dumbledore's cell, Cornelius turned to his assistant, Dolores Umbridge, who as usual had accompanied him. "Do you have the papers?"

Dolores handed them over. "Here they are, Minister."

Albus looked at the pair in befuddlement. "Do I know you? Are you coming to take tea with me?"

"No, I'm the Minister for Magic, and I have something for you," Cornelius said, a little dismayed at how much Albus appeared to have gone downhill since his last visit, and he lifted up the papers Dolores had just handed over. "These papers are for your appeal."

Albus' eyes cleared and he eagerly grabbed the papers that Cornelius was holding through the bars of his cell. "Two weeks?"

"That's the first free hearing," Cornelius said, and then he turned away to face the cell of the man who was supposed to be the Dark Lord's number one associate, Sirius Black. It confounded Cornelius that given his status, Sirius had somehow managed to wangle enough goods to make his cell comfortable, to say nothing of the rather fashionable suit he was currently wearing.

Sirius could see from Cornelius' face that his current situation did not sit well with the Minister, and he was rather sarcastic in his greeting. "Minister Fudge, what brings you to this holiday spot yet again?"

And, as always, Cornelius still did not understand why Sirius had not gone insane like the other inmates, especially given Dumbledore's downward progression. "It's my usual inspection, as you well know."

Sirius glanced at Fudge's bag. "No paper this time?"

Cornelius scowled at Sirius. "No, and I'm not your delivery boy."

"It's a good thing I have my own then," Sirius said, as he sat down his bed and shook out the newspaper that had been delivered just that morning.

Cornelius shook his head and moved on. Only once they had visited each and every inmate would the loathsome job be over. Cornelius did not understand why his predecessor had instigated such a task in the first place; anyone in their right mind would find it tedious and rather gruesome. "I think it's time we left, Dolores."

"I couldn't agree more, Minister," Dolores said as she followed him out. Because of their visit, some of the more unstable inmates were now making a racket that was starting to become earsplitting. "How do you deal with that noise all of the time?"

"Like this," the warden told her as he slid back a door with a resounding clang, and Dolores clutched her fluffy pink jumper right over her heart. "Dementors."

"Don't worry, Madam Undersecretary, they're completely harmless if they're fed regularly." The warden stood back as several of the Dementors glided out and in towards the high security area they had just left. Within moments, the screams and shouts had died down to tortured murmurs and soft pleas to leave them alone. "We'd better be off."

In his cell, Sirius Black felt the cold despair that warned him that the Dementors were almost upon him. Assured that no-one would see, his body began to change, and he became a large black dog, which lay down on the bed and whimpered. Although he was spared most of the effects from the Dementors' presence in this form, he still was not entirely immune.

10th June 1995

Harry sat bolt upright, screaming at the top of his lungs. Then as he came awake, his stomach lurched and he leant over his bed, vomiting until his stomach was empty.

Across the room, Justin and Ernie woke up, Justin moving to Harry's side. "Harry, what's wrong?"

Harry was shivering like a whippet. "I saw him, Justin, I saw him."

Justin vanished the mess Harry had made and picked up Harry's dressing gown. "I'm taking you to Professor Sprout." When Harry

violently shook his head, Justin offered up a second choice. "In that case, how about Professor Lupin?"

Only at Justin's secondary offer did Harry offer up no further resistance and let Justin lead him out of the Hufflepuff dorm.

Remus answered the door to the urgent tapping, wearing just his pajama bottoms. Quickly deducing that something was very wrong, he ushered the two boys inside, before hurrying over to light a fire, using magic to make it more potent. "Tell me what happened."

Despite the heat, Harry was still shivering and Justin removed his own dressing gown and placed this around his friend. "He was screaming, Professor, and then he was sick. He said something about he saw him."

Remus knelt down, taking Harry's ice-cold hand in his. "Harry, who did you see?"

Harry tried hard to control his chattering teeth while he answered, "V-V-Voldemort."

Remus gasped, rose to his feet and pulled out his wand. "Here?"

Harry shook his head. "N-n-no."

"I think a little calming potion is called for," Remus decided, and he headed for his small store of various potions he kept for emergencies such as this.

After Harry had taken the potion, his shivering began to cease and his teeth no longer chattered. "Thanks."

"Can you tell us what you saw, Harry?" Remus asked, placing a blanket around Justin's shoulders as he too was now shivering, the castle still cold inside despite the warmer temperatures that had begun to move across the country as summer got closer.

Because of the potion, Harry was able to speak calmly about what he had seen. "In my dream I was standing in a field and there was a big house behind it. A large cauldron was sitting on a fire, and a woman with long, dark hair was carrying something that looked

almost like a baby, but it was hideous, almost like a monster. She dropped it into the cauldron."

"Do you know who she is?" Remus asked, although he already suspected he knew who Harry was going to identify.

Harry nodded. "She looked a lot like the wanted poster I've seen of Bellatrix Lestrange."

Remus was rather disturbed by this but he nevertheless encouraged Harry to go on. "Please continue."

"She then began reciting something. I can't remember exactly what she said; something about bones, flesh and blood." Harry stopped for a moment, before continuing. "When she said about flesh of a servant, she pulled out a knife and sliced off her hand, dropping it into the cauldron."

"Is that why you were sick?" Justin interrupted.

"Partly," Harry said. "But what came next was worse. There was a blinding flash, and a naked man with the most awful face I've ever seen rose up from nowhere. Then just as suddenly he exploded. It was as if a bomb had gone off inside of him."

Justin now understood why Harry had been sick. "That's awful, Harry."

Harry rubbed his head. "I think seeing Voldemort exploding and covering the woman in blood and stuff, and the searing pain I experienced in my head made me sick."

"How do you know it was You-Know-Who?" Justin asked.

"I just know," Harry said, unable to explain his gut feeling.

"Is there anything else?" Remus pressed.

Harry nodded, his face showing his concern. "After he exploded, the woman screamed out something about a traitorous bastard. I don't know who she was talking about though."

Remus also had no idea. "Is there any more?"

Harry shook his head. "I woke up then."

"We need to report this to the Ministry," Remus decided, keeping his response vague as he was not about to induct another of Harry's friends into his secret. "Harry, I'll arrange for you to have some hot chocolate. Justin, please stay with him."

14th June 1995

Minerva noted a disturbance in the wards, and she got up from her seat. She initially thought about asking Remus to accompany her, but then Minerva remembered that there had been a full moon the night before and Remus would be in no state to assist her. She therefore alerted Severus, and together the two of them headed towards the school gates.

On arriving, Minerva sucked in her breath with shock at the sight of the woman with only one hand. "Lestrangle."

Bellatrix met Minerva's gaze, but made no attempt to pull her wand. "I want you, Snape, you traitorous bastard. You betrayed my Master."

"I did," Severus said, not denying it. "He made his choice and I made mine."

"You're going to be sorry, so sorry, so sorry," Bellatrix chanted, swaying as if in time to music.

It was immediately clear to Minerva that the woman was mad. "Where are the Aurors?"

"Dead!" Bellatrix gave an evil smile and she finally pulled out her wand. "They're all dead, dead, dead, just like little ants I stepped on."

Even though it was clear that Bellatrix was out of her mind, Minerva still found herself believing the woman, although she had no idea how she had bested six Aurors. "You killed your own cousin?"

"She was a blood traitor," Bellatrix said triumphantly, and she threw her wand into the air dancing around, making it even more obvious

that she was deranged. "And she deserved to die, just like you're going to die." Cackling, she began to spin around and around, until she fell to the ground and began to sing at Minerva, "You're going to die, you're going to die."

"I'd like to see you try without a wand," Minerva remarked in an acerbic voice, the wand having landed to the right of her, well inside of the wards.

"I don't think it's going to be so difficult," Bellatrix said slyly, peeping out from behind the mass of black hair that had fallen around her face, and she glanced behind Minerva at Severus, a small smile playing across her lips. "Do you, traitor?"

Minerva gave Bellatrix a scorn filled look. "Do you really think I'd turn my back on you even without your wand in your hand? And you've already said quite correctly that Severus had betrayed your master."

"He did and he's also the one you should be worrying about," Bellatrix said, crowing gleefully as she again looked in Severus' direction. "Shouldn't she, you naughty little traitor?"

It was then that Minerva realized that Bellatrix's wand had gone from the ground. And she finally began to turn around to see what had happened to it, but it was too late, and the green flash of the Killing Curse hit her firmly in the back.

Ignoring his colleague's body, Severus marched over to the gates. "Lestrage, what are you doing here?"

"You betrayed us," she wailed, now starting to weep. "Our Master is gone. The resurrection ritual failed and he's gone."

Severus glanced nervously behind Bellatrix towards the woods. "And you think I did it?"

"Yes," Bellatrix hissed. "And now I'm going to kill you just as I killed those Aurors."

Severus, like Minerva, could see that Bellatrix was from sane as he asked about the Aurors. "You really killed all of the Aurors, just you, a lone woman?"

Bellatrix nodded furiously. "Even with one hand it was too easy. They all died like naughty little Aurors should."

Severus withdrew his wand. "And just like you're going to. Avada Kedavra."

Bellatrix died with a stunned look on her face, and Severus stepped outside of the gates and planted Bellatrix's wand back in her hand. He then headed towards the woods, discovering that there was a pool of blood just beyond where Bellatrix had been standing, but inside the woods themselves there were only five Aurors, who were all dead. However, Tonks wasn't amongst them. Aware that there should have been six Aurors, he could only deduce that somehow Tonks had escaped and he suspected she had been the contributor to the pool of blood. "Pity."

As he was checking the bodies, Severus had no idea that he was being observed by an almost imperceptible mist; a mist that was now rather angry about what had just transpired, but could do little about it. If Severus had been weak minded, the mist would have invaded his body and taken him over, but it was already aware that the ploy would fail almost instantly. So instead the mist floated silently away.

BritAD

Severus finished reporting what had happened to Amelia. "I can't believe Minerva turned around. I... I..." His voice broke, and then strengthened. "I cast the Killing Curse at Lestrage, but I was too late to save Minerva."

"Why didn't you use a stunning curse?" Amelia asked.

"I just reacted instinctively," Severus replied, his voice fearful. "Will I be charged?"

Amelia always weighed up a case like this on its merits, and although she didn't like Severus, under the circumstances, she had decided not to press any charges, but she did issue a warning. "Not this time as it was clearly self defense. But please bear in mind, Professor Snape, that should there be a repeat incident then I may have to review my decision." Amelia went on. "What happened afterwards?"

Severus told the complete truth this time. "I headed out of the school to check on the Aurors, but they were already dead. And although Lestrangle said she had killed Tonks, I was unable to find her body."

"Auror Tonks was attacked and injured quite extensively." Amelia's solemn tone reflected her dismay at what had happened. "But she managed to leave the area, and I spoke to her before they took her into surgery. She confirmed that it was Lestrangle who attacked her, and said that she saw Lestrangle conversing with you and Minerva just before she operated her emergency ring."

"Do you know how Lestrangle managed to overcome six Aurors?" Severus asked, rather curious.

"I was hoping you could tell me," Amelia said, watching a frown christen Severus' face. "I'm not saying that I think you had anything to do with it, but given your history I was hoping you might have some insight into how Lestrangle managed to kill them."

Severus was genuinely at a loss. "I'd need a little more information than you have so far provided."

"Auror Tonks said that they were split into three teams of two: two were in the left of the woods to the gates, two to the right and two guarding the actual gates. Auror Tonks was in the woods to the right with her fellow guard, Auror Jakes, and she said she noticed nothing unusual. Nor did she suspect anything when Auror Jakes suddenly excused himself. He didn't, however, return and so she headed out to find him. That's when Auror Tonks said she experienced a strange feeling, almost as if someone was trying to persuade her in her own head to drop her wand."

"Like the Imperious curse?"

Amelia shook her head. "I asked her the same question, but she said it was different. She said that it was almost as if there was someone else in her head with her. Just as she managed to shake off the sensation, Lestrangle came from behind and used the Petrificus spell on her. Unable to defend herself, Auror Tonks was silenced and tortured. Auror Tonks eventually passed out, and when she came to, Lestrangle was standing outside the gates arguing with you and Professor McGonagall. Auror Tonks was unable to move,

however, since Lestrage had broken her back and her legs. She heard Lestrage taunting the Professor before Auror Tonks used her Auror's ring to take her to St. Mungo's. She never saw her fellow Aurors die and that is why I was wondering if you could help."

Severus had a feeling he knew exactly how Bellatrix had done it. If the resurrection ritual had failed, then their Master would have reverted to an almost gaseous state in which he would have had the ability to enter someone's mind. While he suspected that most able minded wizards would be able to fight it off, it would still be disorientating enough to distract a person long enough to overpower them. "I'm afraid I have no idea. It isn't anything I've come across before."

"If you do think of anything, please let me know," Amelia said. She then held out her hand. "I apologize for doing this, but for the sake of completeness, I still need to check your wand, Professor Snape."

"Of course." Severus handed it over, and he waited while the head of Auror Division cast Prior Incantato on it. Just one Killing Curse and several mundane spells came out.

Amelia dispelled the shadows of the previously cast spells, and then she handed Severus the wand back. "Just like you, Lestrage only had one Killing Curse that came out. The other spells show that she tortured and killed my men by other means."

Severus did the right thing and offered his condolences, which Amelia accepted, her voice heavy with pain. "Thank you, Professor Snape. And thank you for your co-operation."

"If there is anything else I can do..." Severus immediately offered, suspecting that he hadn't been asked to provide his memory of the incident as Tonks had more or less confirmed his innocence, although he was skilled enough in Occlumency to supply a doctored memory that most would find hard to determine was not the truth.

Amelia confirmed his suspicion. "With both your and Auror Tonks' testimonies and her memory, it's an open and shut case. I'll be writing up a report and I will just need your signature to it."

"I will be happy to do provide it," Severus said. He was about to rise to leave when a knock sounded at the door.

Amelia got up and opened it, speaking briefly with the Auror outside. When she returned, her face was grave. "I'm afraid I have some more bad news..."

Hogwarts

Having been roused from his bed by Minchen, one of the school house-elves, an exhausted Remus hurried off to the Headmistress' office to discover Severus sitting behind the desk. "Where is Minerva or Filius?"

"Filius suffered a stroke," Severus told him, revealing what Amelia had found out just as their interview had ended. "Given his unique physiology, St. Mungo's don't believe he'll be ready to return here for at least a week."

Remus sat down in shock. "What could have brought a stroke on?"

"He had some bad news." Severus wanted to gloat at Remus' shocked face, but instead he arranged his face into a semblance of gravity. "Minerva was killed this morning."

"Why wasn't I woken?" Remus asked, his face paling all the more.

"There was a lockdown announcement made to the whole school, but you obviously slept through it," Severus informed him. "I'd have sent Minchen to inform you then, but Aurora said that given you'd be unable to do anything to change what happened, perhaps we would be better to let you sleep off your illness." Severus leant forward. "Does she know what you are?"

"No." Remus wasn't surprised that Aurora had asked he be left to sleep – she believed in getting as much sleep as possible – nor was he surprised that he had slept through the lockdown announcement. Remus had to admit that he could probably sleep through an earthquake for the first few hours after a transformation. Even given their history, his throat felt clogged as he returned to the subject of Minerva, asking, "How did it happen?"

Severus recited what had happened with Bellatrix and Minerva, altering the scenario slightly, just as he had done for Amelia. "... and

I never expected Minerva to believe her and turn, so I wasn't quick enough to react." He looked down as he made his voice falter.

As had been the case since he started at Hogwarts, Remus could feel nothing from Severus. He quite rightly suspected that Severus was using an emotional dampening potion of some sort. But even so, Remus was sure that Severus had to have something to do with Minerva's death and was merely acting out a role, just as he was about to. "I'm sorry, Severus." Even though he was reeling, his thoughts turned to the Aurors who had been outside of the school, although with only one hand, Remus doubted Bellatrix could have done much to them. "Did she manage to kill anyone else?"

"The Aurors on guard," Severus said, watching Remus pale even more. As much as he wanted to let the man suffer, he, like Remus, had a part to play. "But thankfully Tonks survived, although barely. She confirmed my story, and like Filius, she is being treated in St. Mungo's."

Remus was shocked to his core. "Has Gryffindor been told about Minerva yet?"

"An announcement about Filius and Minerva will be made later today in the Great Hall," Severus said.

Remus scowled. "Given that Minerva was still head of Gryffindor when she died, I believe that they should be told in private and not in a public announcement."

"Then you are free to tell them, Lupin," Severus told him, "as you will become the temporary head of Gryffindor." Severus had made the decision based upon what he knew Filius, who would become the new headmaster, would have wanted, although it irked him to give his former schoolmate such a prestigious position.

"In that case I will do so right now," Remus said as he got to his feet. "They don't deserve to hear about any of this in a school-wide announcement."

"Whatever makes you happy," Severus said. "Now, I have things to do." Severus bowed his head and started to write, ignoring Remus.

Remus angrily stalked out of the office. He decided that he would first tell Gryffindor about Minerva, and then Harry, who he knew was rather close to Tonks, and whose relationship with Minerva had finally started to improve over the year.

Gryffindor House

Hermione was seated with George and her fellow Gryffindors when a disembodied voice asked that all Gryffindors assemble in the Common Room. Hermione was rather surprised to see Remus rather than Minerva entering the Common Room, and after flashing the rather stern-faced professor a smile, she waited to hear what he had to say.

Remus took a deep breath. "I'm afraid that I have some terrible news for you all."

At once whispers began to circulate, and Remus held up his hand. "Please be quiet." Those in the Common Room quieted almost immediately, and Remus continued. "As you might have heard, there was an attack on the school this morning, and..." Again the Gryffindors became unsettled, and again Remus was forced to ask them to be quiet.

"As I was saying," Remus said in a grave voice, "there was an attack, and I'm very sorry to have to tell you that Professor McGonagall was killed."

The whispers erupted into an uproar and Remus was unsurprised by the Gryffindors' reactions. Despite Minerva's sternness and her trial several years earlier, she had still been a loyal leader of Gryffindor, and this was evident by the amount of tears that were already flowing, even from some of the boys.

As a crowd began to surround Remus to ask more questions, Ron and Hermione headed into the throng. Eventually, they got to the front and Ron was able to ask, "Sir, does Harry know?"

Remus shook his head. "I'm going to tell him now."

"Can I come with you?" Hermione asked, wanting to be with her friend.

"Yes," Remus said, placing a hand on her shoulder, and making an announcement. "Can I have silence?"

Little by little, the questions ceased, and apart from the sounds of sobs, the room became silent, and Remus was able to speak. "I have been made the temporary head of Gryffindor. My rooms are on the fourth floor, fourth door on the left. I won't be available for the next few hours as I have to pass the news on to others, but after that, should anyone need me, feel free to come see me, even if it is in the middle of night."

The mention of the Headmaster made George realize something. "Why didn't Professor Flitwick tell us about Professor McGonagall?"

"The Professor has been taken unwell, and Professor Snape has stepped in to take his place," Remus announced.

After another barrage of questions, and some unsavory remarks about Severus, Remus had had enough. "SILENCE!"

Gryffindor fell silent. Remus surveyed all those there with a frown on his face. "You have just learned that a beloved teacher is dead and another is ill. Those of you who are complaining about Professor Snape should be ashamed."

Heads dropped as Remus' words were driven home, and a few heartfelt apologies were issued. Remus looked around at the Gryffindors. "That is more like it. If you will excuse me."

Then he turned and left, taking Ron and Hermione with him.

Hufflepuff House

Harry was lying on his bed reading when Remus entered the room, and Remus gave Ernie a terse smile. "Ernie, would you please excuse us?"

Ernie left immediately, spotting Hermione and Ron waiting in the corridor. "What are you doing in here?"

"They are with me," Remus said, as he stepped back out to call the Gryffindors in.

Harry knew then that something was terribly wrong. Hermione's face was tearstained, and Ron barely looked as though he was holding it together, Remus having told them the news about Tonks and the other Aurors as they had made their way to Hufflepuff. "Professor, what's happened?"

Justin could tell it was something bad when Hermione sat down by Harry and took his hand, and Ron did same, taking Harry's other hand. Only then did Remus pass on the bad news. "I'm so very sorry, Harry, but Lestrangle turned up this morning, and she attacked Minerva. Unfortunately Minerva was killed."

Harry sat stunned. "How?"

Remus revealed what he had failed to tell the Gryffindors. "Lestrangle used the Killing Curse on her. Severus fired back but unfortunately he was far too late to save her."

"I bet he let her die," Harry said bitterly, loathing the Potions Master.

Unlike the Gryffindors, Remus didn't berate Harry; instead he defended his colleague, as he was still not entirely sure of the facts until he was able to see the report that he knew would have been filed. "According to Severus, he did everything he could, and it was him who killed Lestrangle. Apparently he had a witness who backed up his story."

"How did she get into the school?" Harry asked, his voice sounding strangled as he tried to hold back the tears that seemed to have come out of nowhere.

"She didn't actually access the school," Remus said. "She attacked from outside of the gates, taunting Minerva that Severus was going to attack her, and as Minerva turned, she killed her."

"But why would Professor McGonagall believe her?" Justin asked.

"This is something you could discover from old newspapers, so I'm going to tell you, but I'd prefer it if this is kept between us," Remus said, about to repeat what he had already told Harry, and Harry had told Hermione. "Severus was a Death Eater."

Ron's face turned ugly. "And you believed his story?"

"He was also a spy for the Light." Although Remus had no idea that Severus had only pretended to become one to try and save Lily, he still had to give the man the benefit of the doubt. "Which is not something you will read in the newspapers."

"You mean he was a double agent?" Justin asked.

"Yes," Remus confirmed. "This is why Lestrangle believed he was a traitor." Remus then went on. "Lestrangle's appearance also confirms that Harry's nightmare that You-Know-How tried to come back to have been true."

All four children looked surprised, Hermione asking, "How could you know that?"

"Lestrangle had only one hand." Remus was unsurprised to see the disgusted looks of the children. "And the failed ritual is backed up by Severus' statement that Lestrangle was apparently ranting about being betrayed by him and that their Master was gone. And Severus, as well as myself, believe that was why she came here: to find him and kill him for the failure of the ritual."

"But how could Snape have been responsible?" Justin asked.

"I don't think he was," Remus said, unaware that Severus had been to blame. "But in Lestrangle's mind because he betrayed their Master he was."

Hermione made a good point. "At least we know one thing, even if Snape wasn't responsible, if Lestrangle said that this ritual failed, then at least we know now that You-Know-Who is temporarily out of action."

Justin agreed with her. "Which is only good news."

Remus unfortunately was about to burst the bubble. "That is good news, but I'm afraid I have more bad news."

Harry swallowed hard. "What is it?"

"Professor Flitwick has suffered a stroke after learning the news about Minerva." Remus then let out a long breath, before going on.

"And Tonks has been seriously hurt. I don't know how badly yet, but I'm going to find out and let you know."

Harry dashed away the tears that threatened and said fiercely, "I want to go with you now."

Remus had half-expected this. "Okay."

"I'm going with him," Justin announced in a firm voice, almost daring Remus to refuse him.

Again Remus had suspected as much that this would happen, and he had therefore already accounted for Justin's demand. "I've already cleared it with Professor Sprout." He turned to Hermione. "And Hermione and Ron, as head of Gryffindor, I'm giving you permission to leave as well if you want to go."

"I do," Hermione sniffled, not letting go of Harry, Ron confirming the same.

Remus decided it was time to go. "There are a lot of students in the Common Room, and so I therefore think we should take the back way."

After sending Ernie back into his room, Remus led the group up the corridor, and after checking no-one else was around, he reached out to touch a stone inset of a badger on the wall, and said, "Loyalty above all else."

Harry followed Remus and his friends into the corridor that appeared. After tapping the badger on the inside of the corridor, the entrance closed.

The Next Day

Sirius picked up the newspaper that had been flung onto the floor of his cell by a disgruntled guard and opened it up. "Fuck!"

More coherent than he had been for quite some time, Albus got up off his bed. "Bad news?"

Shaking and pale, Sirius turned around to face Albus and offered up his sympathies. "I'm really sorry, Dumbledore, but McGonagall's dead. My cousin killed her."

Albus' legs gave way and he collapsed onto the bed. Even though he had assured Minerva's loyalty to him, he had genuinely liked the woman, and he was more than a little upset to hear the news. He also knew where he believed the blame should be placed. "You bastard. You set this up, didn't you?"

Sirius sighed, aware that nothing he could say would make any difference. "No, and I'm truly sorry that McGonagall is dead."

Albus turned away and said nothing further, his tears blinding him and choking off anything that he might have wanted to say.

Next Chapter: Harry returns to BritAD

Chapter 37: Return to BritAD

15th July 1995

Molly called out to Harry and Ron, who were indulging in a game of chess, a look of intense concentration of their faces, as neither wanted to lose this decider. "You've both got mail from BritAD."

Ron yelled back. "Be there in a minute." He then moved his queen to take Harry's bishop and check his king. "Check."

Harry hid his smile at the sacrifice, which he knew was about to set him up for victory. "Nice move." After congratulating Ron, he moved one of his pawns forward and the moment he did, he could see that Ron had spotted what was about to happen.

Ron groaned after playing out all the possible moves he had available to him, before he reluctantly knocked over his king. "I still don't know how you manage to beat me."

"It went to the wire," Harry reminded him, as this had been the final game of seven.

Ron ordered the chess pieces away and folded up the board. "But I still don't know how you do it. Ever since we first played, you've been almost unbeatable."

"Almost," Harry said softly. "Not totally unbeatable."

"I'm sure it's coming though," Ron said grumpily as this was the fourth time so far that Harry had beaten him, Ron not having won one tournament between the two of them since the start of the holidays.

"I doubt it," Harry said and he nodded towards the kitchen. "Come on, let's see what mail we've got."

When Harry opened up his letter it was to discover that it was an invitation to attend BritAD yet again, both him and Ron having returned the previous summer. "You've probably been invited back as a trainee. I have."

Ron's letter, however, was a little different. "No-one in fifth or sixth year made the grade to be allowed onto the course. Three seventh years made it, so they're offering the remaining three places to all those who will be fifth years in September and turn sixteen before 31st December."

"But you don't turn sixteen in time," Harry said, a frown marring his features.

"Madam Bones said that as I've done really well each time we've gone back, that I can apply and take the tests if I want to go back," Ron said, grinning until he opened up the folded sheaves of parchment that had accompanied the invitation, which at that moment were blank. "I have to complete four tests under Dad's supervision and then return them by Friday 21st July."

"What are the tests?" Harry asked.

Ron referred back to the letter. "They're all theory tests – Potions, Defense, Charms and Transfiguration."

"Then we'd better get studying," Harry said determinedly.

"But you've already been accepted, haven't you?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, but it would be cool if you could go again."

Ron beamed at his friend, and said, "Let's study then."

Molly set about making dinner, her smile even bigger than Ron's. It seemed that although she was unable to persuade him to study, the thought of returning to BritAD had a very different effect. She just hoped her son would be successful in his endeavors.

4th August 1995

Harry stepped into the training room, trailing behind Hermione, Justin, Ron, and Blaise Zabini, all of whom had applied to BritAD to take part in the trainee program. Although, because of Harry's and the twins' frantic tutoring, Ron had scored slightly higher than Blaise, it had been pointed out to Amelia by Aditi, her second in command, that it would look odd having no Slytherins on the course, with the three seventh years who had made the course all coming from

Ravenclaw. Amelia had therefore extended the three junior places to four and hoped that the children would put their house differences aside.

"Hello, Trainees," Tonks said as she beamed at them. Since her recovery from Lestrage's attack, Tonks, who now bore a permanent limp, had moved into training, and she had volunteered to take the younger Hogwarts trainees under her wing. "Trainee Potter, are you ready to take your final test?"

Justin turned on Harry. "Final test? I thought we were learning apparition together."

"I wanted to surprise you," Harry said gleefully. "I actually finished my training last week while you were all sitting in on classes but Examiner Twycross was unavailable until today for my final test."

"Trainee Potter picked it up first time," Tonks announced, looking proudly at him. "It was as if he's been doing it all of his life." She had no idea that Remus had taught Harry to apparate some time ago, and to Harry this was nothing but practice.

"So what are you going to be doing for your mornings this week if you're not learning to apparate?" Hermione asked in a fake disappointed voice, being well aware of Harry's training with Remus and more than a little envious of him.

"A bit of defense training, but mostly teaching you about apparition," Harry revealed, although judging from the unperturbed look on Blaise's face, Harry suspected that the boy could also already apparate.

Unfortunately it was apparent that Justin, although he'd trust Harry with his life, was rather nervous about the whole apparition thing. "But he's no expert, and he hasn't even passed his test yet."

Harry spoke up before Tonks could. "My test is mostly just red tape."

Tonks confirmed Harry's claim. "He is actually really good at apparating, but as you quite rightly pointed out, Trainee Finch-Fletchley, he is no expert. And so, once he's passed his test, his job won't actually be teaching you. He will be assisting me, mostly for the purposes of demonstrating how things are done."

Harry pulled a face at Tonks. "Spoilsport. I was enjoying teasing them."

Justin subsequently punched him in the arm. "That wasn't funny, Harry."

"I thought it was," Blaise said, earning him a scowl from Ron, who being Ron, was already predisposed to hating Blaise.

Tonks refrained from saying anything to Blaise as a man came in through the door, and she instead turned her attention to Harry. "Trainee Potter, if you would go with Examiner Twycross, he'll take you to the test center. And in your absence I'll start explaining to the other Trainees what's going to happen."

When Harry returned, he discovered his friends being taught about destination, determination and deliberation. Hermione was scribbling in a notepad, and Harry glanced over her shoulder to see what she had written, reading out loud, 'One must be completely determined to reach one's destination, and move without haste, but with deliberation'.

Hermione jumped at the sound of Harry's voice so close to her ear. "I didn't hear the door."

Harry grinned in triumph. "I apparated in from the test center."

Hermione frowned in confusion. "Isn't apparition banned inside the Ministry?"

"Not if you have level one clearance, it isn't," Tonks remarked in a slightly annoyed voice.

Harry could see that he had upset Tonks and he therefore had the good grace to blush and apologize. "Sorry, Auror Tonks. What do you want me to do?"

Tonks mellowed at his submissive response. "We are just going to be dealing with the basics this morning, and so..."

11th August 1995

During the weekday mornings, Harry had found himself splitting his time between doing more defense training and helping Tonks with his three friends and Blaise. And despite her disappointment that Harry had not been there with her all of the time, Hermione had thoroughly enjoyed herself, and out of the three children she had surprisingly gotten along well with Blaise, with whom Tonks had partnered her. But now it was crunch time for all of them as they reached the final hurdle they had to overcome before they could take their apparition tests.

Tonks stood at the apparition area. "Trainee Potter, if you would apparate to point 43 and wait for Trainee Zabini."

Harry checked his miniature guide and then imagined the point described there, disappearing almost silently. Justin scowled. "He's only been apparating for two weeks. How does he do that?"

"I wish I knew," Tonks remarked. "I've been apparating for years and I still sound like a herd of elephants." She turned to Ron. "I'm going to apparate to point 36. When you are ready, and only when you are ready, I want you to follow me. The same for you, Trainee Zabini - only follow Trainee Potter when you are ready to do so."

Blaise had vanished almost before the words were out of Tonks' mouth, a crack sounding as he appeared alongside Harry. "What now?"

Harry didn't answer the question. "You've done this before, haven't you?"

Blaise smirked. "Maybe. But I think I could say that the same for you, Potter, and not just for apparating. Your dueling is definitely well above fourth year, or even fifth year, standards, although I could teach you a thing or two."

Harry didn't doubt it. "Thanks but I'll pass."

"Just remember, the offer is open, at least for now." Blaise returned to the reason why they were there. "So, what do I do now?"

"You simply need to return back to BritAD intact," Harry said.

A crack signaled Hermione's arrival and she smiled at both boys.
"Am I all in one piece?"

"Yes, and a very lovely piece, if I may say so," Blaise said winking at Hermione, before disappearing.

Hermione noticed Harry's scowl. "You don't look happy."

"He was flirting with you, Hermione," Harry said angrily, none too happy about Blaise's flagrant act.

"Harry, he's been flirting with me and Tonks all week," Hermione said, reminding Harry that she had not been Blaise's only target that week. "It's just the way he is, and you know I'd never do anything, particularly with someone cocky like him. He's not my type."

Harry exhaled. "Sorry, but I think he's a little too sure of himself for his own good."

"Harry," Hermione ventured tentatively. "Even though you're going out with Hannah, do you think you're angry with Blaise because he's going out with Ginny?"

Harry immediately denied it. "You've got to be joking, Hermione. I barely have anything to do with Ginny unless I really have to and, to be perfectly honest, I wouldn't care if she dated the whole of Slytherin, they're welcome to her."

Hermione could see that Harry was being honest. "Then is it because I'm your friend?"

"Most definitely, and I don't like him messing with Tonks but I know she can take care of herself," Harry said, not having enjoyed watching Blaise converse with either young woman.

"And so can I," Hermione said softly, placing a hand on Harry's arm. "But thank you for caring."

"Just be careful around him," Harry warned, not quite so sure about Hermione's abilities.

Hermione decided a change in subject was in order. "So I suppose I need to apparate back now." Hermione was unable to stop a huge grin from spreading across her face as she thought about it.

"Anytime you're ready," Harry said, unable to stop himself smiling in return at Hermione's enthusiasm.

When Harry arrived back after taking a moment to calm his anger over Blaise's attitude, all four children had gone to take the final test, and Harry was relieved and pleased when Ron was first back, clutching a piece of paper in his hand.

"I did it, Harry! I really did it!"

Harry smiled. "I knew you could."

When the other three returned, Tonks shook hands with the examiner and then turned to the children. "Why don't I take you all out for lunch to celebrate?"

"I'll buy," Harry immediately said, but he turned to Tonks for an idea of where to go. "Can you suggest somewhere really nice?"

"Tortinis is a good restaurant if you like Italian food," Tonks responded. "It's just a short apparition point away."

Justin was excited to be putting his newfound skill to the test, and he announced, "I'm ready."

"I just need to let the action desk know where I am," Tonks said as she limped out of the testing room. "I'll meet you all down in the foyer."

Blaise gave Harry a cool look. "Am I invited?"

Harry nodded, wanting to say no but good manners prevailed. "Of course."

"Then I'll see you downstairs," Blaise said, vanishing.

Harry led Hermione, Ron and Justin out of the room, putting his arm around Justin's shoulders in a friendly gesture. "I'm really glad you applied to do this. It made this week more fun."

"I'm glad as well," Justin answered, tugging Hermione forward so that she was in between him and Harry.

Ron slipped in between Harry and Hermione, looping his arms around his friends as all four filled the corridor they were walking up. "Me too. It was exciting, and I got to see..."

When Harry and his friends returned to BritAD after a surprisingly congenial lunch, they were all taken to the room that contained the instrument for measuring their power. Hermione went first and was thrilled when she registered one hundred and eighty-nine, which was rather high for a witch of her age and blood purity. Ron was relieved to come in at one hundred sixty-seven, having harbored the fear that he would not have moved since last year, when he came in at one hundred and forty-eight. Justin's measurement was something of a surprise, registering even higher than Hermione at one hundred and ninety-one, something Harry suspected would irritate his friend, especially as Blaise was at one hundred and ninety. However, it was he himself who would receive the biggest shock.

Once Justin had climbed down, Amelia indicated that Harry should take his place on the scales. "Please climb onto the scale, Trainee Potter."

Harry did as he was told, even though he knew it was a complete waste of time, as Remus had tested him at the start of the summer, and he tried to put Amelia off. "It's not been that long since you last did this."

"It's been a year since I last did this, and I therefore want to check your reading again," Amelia said, and she looked down, hiding her stunned surprise. "Thank you, Trainee Potter."

Harry now looked down at his own monitor and his surprise showed on his face as he questioned the reading, which had actually risen quite substantially in the space of two months. "Is it working properly?"

Blaise smirked. "Not very high, eh, Potter?"

Amelia turned a frown on Blaise. "There is something obviously wrong with the machine. Trainee Potter, I'm afraid I'll have to take you to our secondary test facility. The rest of you should wait here."

She then led Harry out, erecting a privacy bubble after closing the day. "I'm not going to record your true power level, Harry. I don't want anyone else knowing about this, and I'd prefer for Zabini to think you're a squib rather than as powerful a wizard as you apparently are now."

"So I take it you don't want me to mention this to anyone?" Harry asked.

"No," Amelia said hurriedly as she began to head up the corridor. "The fewer people who are aware, the better."

"But why not?" Harry asked, wondering what objections Amelia had.

"There are many reasons why not," Amelia smiled consolingly at the boy. "My main one being that should You-Know-Who ever rise again, I'd rather he have no idea of how powerful you are. In fact I'm about to show you something that I finally think you're ready to see."

"I don't understand," Harry said, suspecting Amelia was talking about the prophecy, and so he acted confused by Amelia's comment.

Leaving the testing area, Amelia headed up the corridor until they reached her private elevator. Once inside, she pressed the number nine, and the lift ascended. After they reached the correct floor and disembarked, Amelia led Harry up a stark white corridor, at the end of which was a black door. "As you know from your tour of the facility, behind this door is a room that will be a little disorientating at first until we identify ourselves, and the room recognizes our magical signatures."

Only once she was satisfied that Harry was ready, did Amelia open the door and step into the room. As it began to spin, she identified herself. "Amelia Bones, Head of British Auror Division, Access Hall of Prophecy."

Harry also identified himself, and soon the room ended its nauseating spinning, and across from them, another door opened.

Amelia indicated that they should all go that way. "The door leads to the Hall of Prophecy."

Aware of what Amelia expected, Harry asked the same question he had asked of Remus previously. "What's the Hall of Prophecy?"

"It's a room that contains all the prophecies made in the wizarding world." Amelia stood aside so that Harry could walk by her, and she held out her arm to indicate the space beyond. "This is the Hall of Prophecy."

By the light of hundreds of blue-flame candles, as he had when he had come to this room with Remus, Harry could see towering shelves that to him seemed to stretch into infinity. Remembering he was supposed to be surprised he fell back on his favorite word. "Wow! What exactly are they?"

"They are recording devices made to store the prophecies." Amelia started walking. "But be warned, if you touch one that doesn't pertain to you, you will be driven insane."

As they walked, Harry thought he had better ask a question. "Why are we here?"

"I want you to see a prophecy," Amelia said, as she finally came to a standstill. "And I have a feeling that despite my earlier warning, you will be sharing what you know with all of your friends anyway."

Harry was unable to tell her that he already told them, and so he gave a nondescript answer. "Probably."

Given Harry's answer, Amelia gave him a warning. "Just make sure that you can trust who you tell. And I don't mean that lightly. For instance, as much as I know that you trust my niece..."

Harry interrupted. "I do totally."

"Let me finish," Amelia chided him gently. "I don't think you should tell Susan. She would never deliberately hurt you but I'm afraid the girl can't help herself sometimes, and she might let something slip. So, as I just said, even though you might trust someone, please don't tell them unless you really are certain you can trust them not to give you away, whether it be accidental or not."

"I won't," Harry promised, trusting everyone he had told so far, particularly as he was now aware that Susan had hidden the truth from her aunt about the prophecy.

Satisfied, Amelia then proceeded to show Harry what he already knew...

August 19th 1995

Harry finished touring the grounds of Justin's home. "I never imagined you lived anywhere so large."

"It's my father's family home and has been in his family for generations," Justin said as he walked back towards the side door of the house. "We'd better hurry inside. I'm expecting someone."

Harry guessed that the someone had arrived when he heard voices and he ground to a halt as he spotted Hermione talking to Justin's mother, Cordelia. "Hermione?"

Hermione swung around. "Hi, Harry, Justin."

Justin grabbed his mother's arm. "I need to talk to you, Mum. Harry, the sitting room is through that door."

Once inside the room, Hermione shut the doors. "How are you?"

"Amazed to see you here," Harry said truthfully, Justin not having mentioned anything about Hermione joining them.

"I had a massive argument with Mummy a few days ago and Justin said his invitation to stay was still open, so I came," Hermione said, moving to stand by the fireplace. "Daddy is out of the country at a conference so I couldn't go to him."

Harry was saddened to hear about Hermione's bleak home life. "I'm so sorry, Hermione."

"Mummy and I just can't seem to get along," Hermione said lightly. "She never seems happy with what I'm doing, and..."

All conversation suddenly went south when a smiling Luna burst into the room. "Hello, I thought I heard voices and I couldn't see anyone to meet me outside. Daddy wanted to stay and say hello but he has to get back to the Quibbler."

Most of Hermione's misery drained away at the sight of her strangely dressed friend: Luna was wearing a bright orange skirt trimmed with pompoms that she had teamed up with an acid yellow tee-shirt declaring 'World Peace' and on her feet she had purple flip-flops. "That's a very interesting look."

"I found a magazine Daddy had on Muggle fashion and so I made myself some clothes using the pictures in the magazine to give me ideas," Luna said brightly, hugging Harry first and then Hermione.

"It's very you," Hermione said diplomatically.

Luna beamed. "I think it's very rad."

Harry laughed at Luna's rather out-dated idiom. "So do I. Let's go find Justin."

Unfortunately, the rest of the day turned out to be a nightmare for everyone involved. Justin's father, Edmund, loathed Luna on sight, telling his son that he was glad that Justin was no longer dating the girl, and he could not understand why he had even invited her to stay given that they were no longer dating.

When Justin had tried to explain that he and Luna were friends and would remain so, Edmund had demanded he end the unsuitable friendship; being a Finch-Fletchley, Justin had to consider what people would think. Angry at his father's highhanded attitude, for the first time in his life, Justin had stood up to his father, defending his former girlfriend and refusing to give up her friendship, the result of which was that Edmund had given Justin until the New Year to come to his senses, before packing his bags and leaving for a week's holiday alone, refusing to stay with people he considered freaks.

Harry had been very much reminded of his own relatives.

Two days later, Harry was lying on the grass watching clouds streaking overhead when Hermione joined him. "I thought you were going shopping with Justin, Luna and Cordelia." Unlike Justin's

father, whom the children had addressed formally before he had left in a huff, Justin's mother had insisted that all of them call her 'Cordelia', and unlike Edmund, all three children had taken almost immediately to her, and Luna had been happy to go shopping when Cordelia had asked her.

"I'm not a big shopper, Harry," Hermione said, throwing down a blanket and sitting on it. She then pulled out a basket from her pocket and enlarged it. "Marissa, the cook, thought we might like a picnic."

Harry sat up at the mention of food. "What's in there?"

Hermione opened up the basket and began to take things out. "Milk and cola, pork pie, cheese sandwiches, pickled onions, pickles and some sort of cake."

Harry's stomach grumbled and he began to help himself to some of the food, happily munching on a sandwich. "I thought the whole week was going to be a disaster when Justin's dad was ballistic, but now he's gone, it's turning out to be really good fun, particularly the pool."

"I wish I had a swimming pool in the house," Hermione said enviously, the entire group having messed around in it the day before.

"Never mind," Harry said sympathetically. "There's always the lake at school."

Hermione threw a napkin at him. "If I want hypothermia!"

Harry grinned at her. "I'm sure you could find a spell to keep you warm."

"I'm sure I could," Hermione said primly, but it was obvious that her thoughts had been turned elsewhere. "I really should have brought next year's books with me; I could have gotten ahead."

"I'd have burnt them," Harry said in a serious voice, but his smile belied his tone.

"No, you wouldn't, Harry Potter," Hermione said in a slightly snotty voice. "I'd have hexed you into next year if you had done that."

"Then it's a good job you didn't bring the books," Harry countered as he bit into a huge pickled onion, his face crinkling a little at the tart taste. "I love these and they never have them at school."

Hermione wasn't so keen. "They make your breath smell."

Harry shrugged. "It's not as if I'm going to be kissing Hannah anytime soon."

"Are you missing her?"

"Up until now I've seen her at least twice a week," Harry informed Hermione, as he wasn't sure that she knew. "But with her family on holiday in California, I can't exactly apparate to see her."

"Never mind, you'll be back at Remus' home before you know it, and you'll be able to see her in a couple of weeks," Hermione said, hiding her misery at the thought of it.

Silence fell for a while as the two friends polished off everything Marissa had packed before falling asleep under the cloudy sky. When she awoke, Hermione discovered that somehow the two of them had managed to become entangled, and she was lying with her head on Harry's chest and his arm was around her. Discomfited, she slowly and carefully slipped out of his embrace before nudging him and lying. "You're snoring, Harry."

Harry jumped awake. "What?"

"I said you're snoring," Hermione said as she stood up and stretched, wanting to put a little distance between her and Harry. "I feel so lazy. I need to do something."

Harry grabbed her hand and vanished, reappearing in Remus' home. "Macclesby?"

Macclesby appeared. "Mister Harry, sir, can I help you?"

"I need my broomstick, but I wanted to check with Remus if I could take it out."

"Master Remus is in China, Mister Harry," Macclesby informed Harry, having been told by Remus that he could talk freely about Remus' movements in front of both Harry and Hermione. "And he won't be back until a few days before you be returning to your schooling."

"Then I guess I don't have to ask," Harry said and he hurried down the corridor towards his bedroom. "Come on. You haven't seen my room here yet."

Hermione dutifully followed Harry along the corridor and into his bedroom. "This is tidy but then again I suppose Macclesby keeps it this way."

Harry, who had his head buried in his closet, called back, "Yeah, he does." Straightening up and coming out, he had a broomstick in his hand. "Found it."

"I don't like flying, Harry," Hermione reminded him.

"You'll enjoy this," Harry said, grabbing her hand and vanishing again, reappearing in the middle of nowhere. "This is part of the Potter Estate. I can't actually gain access to the house until I turn seventeen but I can use the grounds to fly. Remus brought me here at the start of the summer."

"And you go on about Justin and how big his property is," Hermione said a little derisively. "I can't even see your house."

"Get on the broomstick," Harry ordered, suddenly feeling a little embarrassed by the size of the property he owned. "And I'll show you the house."

"Just apparate us," Hermione said, not willing to get on the broomstick.

"Trust me," Harry said softly. "It looks far better from the air."

Somewhat reluctantly, Hermione climbed on behind Harry. "Let's go then."

Harry rose up about ten feet and slowly moved off, taking care not to frighten Hermione, as he knew that she really did hate flying. "I'm just going to take it slowly."

"Good," Hermione said, clinging on tightly to Harry. As he sped up a little, she held on more firmly, linking her arms around his waist and hiding her face in his back.

Harry grinned and pushed the broomstick a little harder, making Hermione squeal. His grin soon slipped, however, as Hermione pressed even closer to him, her breasts being squashed against his back, and Harry's body began to react to her proximity. Deciding that it was a mistake to have Hermione on the back of the broomstick, Harry flew down to the ground, and once off the broomstick he pulled out his tee-shirt to cover the top of his trousers and said, "I can feel you shaking, so let's walk from here."

Since it was true, Hermione was thoroughly relieved by the suggestion and noticed nothing amiss with her friend. "Okay then."

When they returned to Justin's home, Harry sought his friend out, dragging him into his bedroom. "Justin, I have a massive problem."

Justin sat down on the sofa that was by the open window in Harry's bedroom. "Spit it out then."

"I took Hermione flying at the Potter Estate and I had a bit of a reaction to her being up against my back," Harry said in a despairing voice.

"You mean you got a..." Justin began, only for Harry to cut him off.

"Yes!" Harry's pacing became more fervent. "I landed but the whole time I was showing her around the Estate, I couldn't think about anything other than kissing her."

"This is a bit sudden, isn't it?" Justin asked. "You were pining over Hannah yesterday."

"I know and I'm really confused," Harry said in dismay. "I really, really like Hannah, but I wanted to kiss Hermione. And it's not the first time. I don't know what to do."

In an effort to help Harry sort his feelings out, Justin made a confession. "Harry, even though I was going out with Luna, I had a bit of a thing for Pansy Parkinson... I still do actually."

Harry forgot about his own problems at Justin's confession. "But she's a Slytherin and Malfoy's girlfriend!"

"And she's really quite nice," Justin said, although he knew that was he was about to say would shock Harry. "I've spoken to her in the library a couple of times."

Harry's eyebrows both shot up into his hairline. "You spoke to her?"

"She spoke to me actually – she couldn't reach a book and she had left her wand in her room," Justin said. "But she only speaks to me if no-one else is around."

"You kept that quiet," Harry said accusingly.

"Because I knew how you'd react," Justin said, being his totally honest self as usual.

Harry went red. "Sorry, but it is something of a surprise." He gave Justin a piercing look. "Do you honestly like her?"

Justin nodded. "Yes, and I think she likes me as well. And I admit I've wondered what it would be like to kiss her."

This shocked Harry to the core. "Really?"

"Really," Justin confirmed, before going on to discuss the reason behind revealing his personal feelings. "But I'm well aware that no-one would accept her, and I don't like her enough to risk the relationships I have with you and everyone else. Just like you would never do anything to risk your relationship with Hannah, as you proved today."

"But I feel as if I did do something wrong," Harry argued.

Justin stood up. "Look, did you kiss or touch Hermione?"

Harry shook his head. "No."

"Then stop worrying," Justin said. "You did the right thing by landing when you felt that things were getting a bit heated, so as Luna keeps repeating, take a chill pill, Harry."

"Okay," Harry said, deciding he was blowing things out of proportion. He then looked curiously at Justin. "Did Luna know you had a bit of a thing for Pansy?"

Justin nodded. "Yes, but as I knew that she had a major crush on Professor Lupin, we both decided we were pretty even."

Harry turned at a knock at the door. "Saved by the bell, well knock! Come in."

Luna came into the room looking rather reserved. "Cordelia said dinner is almost ready but I wanted to talk to Justin."

Harry got the message and left the couple alone. Justin guessed that it had to be something important from Luna's serious demeanor. "Is this about what Father said about you?"

Luna nodded. "I've been thinking about it and I don't want to cost you your inheritance, especially as we're not actually dating."

"I don't care about the inheritance, Luna," Justin said, taking her hand. "I don't need his money."

"But he is your family, Justin," Luna responded softly, no sign of her usual scatterbrained outlook on her face. "And I think that family is the most important thing in the world."

"You're going to break your friendship off with me, aren't you?" Justin asked, his face falling in dismay. Although he had broken things off romantically with Luna, he did still care a great deal about the girl, as he had proved with his invitation to his home.

Luna shook her head. "No, but I think it might be better if I went home. Your father can come back then and he'll think that you've ended our friendship."

"He can go f..." Justin said, only to be cut off by Luna.

"Don't," Luna said softly. "I've already firecalled Daddy and he agrees with me."

She then turned and left the room, and by the end of the night she had left. What was left of the night was spent with Harry commiserating with his friend, unaware he was about to be treated very similarly but for very different reasons.

Next Chapter: Hannah makes a decision about her relationship with Harry; Harry gets a shock when he finds himself inexplicably entered in the Triwizard Tournament. Hopefully the update will be online on Monday.

Chapter 38: The Goblet of Fire

August 30th 1995: Year Five

Hannah finished packing her trunk to return to school, and she sighed. She and Harry had spent the entire week together, and what should have been an idyllic time had been anything but that. Hearing a knock at the door, she turned around to discover Harry standing there. "Hi."

Harry slipped into the room. "Hi." He could see that Hannah felt as uncomfortable as he did. "Hannah, um, about last night..."

Hannah stopped Harry before he could bumble on. "Harry, let's just forget about it."

Harry closed the door behind him. "I can't and I want to say sorry. I really didn't mean for things to go that far..."

Once again, Hannah interrupted him. "Or for Remus to walk in on us, I know." She went and sat down on the bed, patting a space beside her, suddenly feeling calm and collected. "Come and sit down."

Harry had a feeling he already knew what was coming and so he pre-empted Hannah. "You're going to finish with me, aren't you?"

Hannah slowly nodded. "I love you, Harry, I really do, but I don't think things are working between us."

"Is this because of last night?" Harry asked, although he suspected it had more to do with how he had treated Hannah during her stay. While he hadn't been horrible, he had been distracted, as despite his talk with Justin about Hermione, she had been very much in the forefront of his thoughts throughout most of the week, and so he had been far from attentive towards Hannah, at least until the previous evening.

Hannah shrugged. "Sort of – I let things go as far as they did last night because I felt as though..." Hannah trailed off as she struggled to find the words to express her feelings.

Harry tried to stop her, not wanting her to be any more embarrassed about her behavior than he suspected she already was. "Hannah, it's okay. You don't have to do this."

"I do," Hannah said, before going on. "I was really looking forward to staying here with you, but when I was here, you didn't seem like yourself, and so I thought if we, um, went further, then you'd be like yourself again."

Harry had been surprised when Hannah had all but offered herself up to him on a plate the previous night, and he winced as he thought about how the previous evening had played out. "To be honest, I think last night just made things worse."

"So do I," Hannah agreed. "So could we going back to being friends again, like Luna and Justin?"

Filled with a relief he had not expected to experience on breaking up with someone he had thought he was in love with, Harry nodded. "Yeah."

"Would you like me to go home?" Hannah offered, not entirely sure as to what sort of protocol governed this type of break-up.

Harry shook his head. "No, you might as well stay. I don't want to have to explain at dinner tonight why you want to go home early."

Hannah had forgotten that Remus was taking her and Harry to dinner with her parents before she and Harry returned to school. And she winced as she thought about what her parents might say if she tried to tell them why she had broken up with Harry. "Then why don't we pretend we're still going out together, at least for tonight?"

Harry hurriedly agreed. "Good idea." He leant across and kissed Hannah's cheek. "I really am sorry about last night."

"So am I," Hannah said, before reiterating her hope of friendship. "And I do want us to be friends, Harry."

"I'd like that too," Harry responded, getting up. But in spite of his words, he truly wanted nothing than to put some space between him and his former girlfriend. "I'd better go and finish getting ready, so I'll see you later."

Almost as relieved as Harry to be alone again, Hannah flopped back onto the bed as Harry left, wondering if her hopes of things not being awkward would actually work out. She had the sinking feeling that they would not.

October 29th 1995

Harry waited with everyone else for the Goblet of Fire to spit out a name. Just like his friends, he had been quite excited to learn that the new headmaster, Filius Flitwick, had decided that it would be a good idea to start up the Triwizard Tournament again. It had been announced a few days after their return to school but despite his initial excitement, Harry had been equally disappointed to discover that because of the Tournament, quidditch had been cancelled for the year. His thoughts about quidditch were pushed aside as suddenly the Goblet flared up and a piece of cream paper came whirling out.

Severus picked it up, and read out loud the name. "From Beauxbatons, Jacot Vigier."

Harry clapped loudly with the rest of the school as the blonde boy bowed and then left the room. Once more the ancient Goblet, which held the names of those who were over seventeen and who had chosen to vie to represent their school, spat out a name.

And again, Severus read it out loud. "From Durmstrang, Natasha Vladimir."

A tall and very dark-haired girl with the most striking bone structure stood up and bowed, before leaving the Great Hall.

For Hogwarts the next part was the most exciting. This was to be the person who would represent their school. The Goblet flared up, and a name was spat out. Severus' face was a picture of disgust as he read out the announcement. "From Hogwarts, George Weasley."

Gryffindor went wild. Harry was clapping madly as Justin nudged him. "I don't think Snape was too happy about that."

"Tell me something I don't know," Harry said, grinning.

Harry's grin soon slipped off his face as the Goblet flared up once more and a final slip of paper came out bearing his name. "That can't be possible."

Filius beckoned to Harry. "Please come and join the other Champions, Mr. Potter."

A totally stunned Harry stumbled to his feet and set off in the same direction the other Champions had gone.

One Week Later

Harry struggled against the hand that was currently clamped over his mouth, only relaxing when he heard a voice say, "It's me, Amicus."

Remus released Harry when he was sure that Harry wouldn't make any sound, and he whispered, "Hufflepuff tunnel."

Harry quietly slipped out of bed, pulled on his dressing gown, and then he headed for the tunnel. Once inside, he saw that Remus had transfigured something into two chairs or had brought them with him. "I thought you were back in China."

"I was, but Ignotus pulled me out," Remus said, handing Harry a hot chocolate that he seemed to produce out of nowhere, and casting a warming spell as it wasn't that temperate in the tunnel. "Did you put your name in?"

Harry shook his head. "Of course not."

Remus relaxed on determining that Harry was telling the truth. "Then I'm afraid that someone has it in for you."

"I've been having some dreams about Voldemort," Harry admitted. "So I think it might be him."

"Why didn't you write and tell me?" Remus snapped, worry tingeing his voice.

"Because they didn't feel real," Harry said, taking a sip of his hot chocolate before going on, "but given what's gone on, I think they might be."

"You'd better tell me now," Remus said.

"He's just a mist in my dream, but he keeps whispering that he's going to kill me," Harry revealed. "Then I wake up, which is why I think that they might just be normal dreams."

"And they might not," Remus countered, now more than a little worried. "I need to get back into the school somehow, and I can't take up the Defense position as Moody's now in it."

"You think I'm in danger again?" Harry asked in alarm, having put down his name being included to a prank.

"It could just have been a fan of yours who did it," Remus had to admit. "But then again it could have been someone who intended for you to become part of the Tournament for more nefarious reasons. And once your name comes out of the Goblet in the final ceremony, then as you probably already know you're magically bound to take part."

Harry swallowed hard. "So do you think Voldemort has something to do with it or not?"

"Maybe, maybe not, but either way I've been ordered to find a way back in here," Remus said. "Ignotus has already reassigned my current case to someone else, and so I'll need to try and sort something out, but in the meantime be careful."

"Thanks." Harry sighed as he got to his feet. "Just what I need, another nightmare year."

"It might just have been a coincidence, Harry," Remus responded as he took Harry's mug from him and banished it out of existence. "But given what's happened to you up until now, I'm willing to bet that it's not." He also gave Harry another warning. "And you should know that Karkaroff was a former Death Eater."

Harry gave a shiver. "Don't tell me, he offered up a lot of information and he walked."

Remus nodded. "Good guess." Vanishing the chairs, he spotted the Marauders Map in Harry's dressing gown pocket. "Check to see if

the coast is clear and then leave. I'm going out the same way I came in."

"Hopefully I'll see you soon," Harry said, and after bidding Remus goodbye, he checked the Map, found the corridor was clear and left the hidden passage.

Laurifer Manor (formerly Riddle House)

Severus bowed low as he entered the room. "I..."

"...did very well," Tom said as he put down a newspaper showing the four Champions. "Does anyone suspect you?"

"No, if anyone is under suspicion, it's Karkaroff," Severus told him.

"Good. Now given my counterpart's earlier failure, I've decided to go with a back-up plan to take out Potter should our current plan fail," Tom said.

Severus enquired as to Tom's plans. "Do you have anything in mind?"

"Yes," Tom said, having had some time to think about things. "You're going to brew the Trucido Progenius Potion."

Severus was rather confused. "That potion is used to eliminate bloodlines. There must be an easier way to kill Potter if our current plan fails."

"Potter is not my only target," Tom informed him, before outlining what he was aiming to do.

"You are aware that the potion takes months to brew?"

"Yes, and I'm also aware that it might take you some time to obtain the necessary blood."

"Are you sure that it is wise?"

"You're questioning my decision?" Tom asked in a silky voice reminiscent of the older Voldemort.

"Of course not," Severus immediately said, not wishing to come under the Cruciatus curse, something Tom had started using recently.

"Keep it that way," Tom ordered. "You may go, and make sure you don't fail me."

"I won't fail," Severus said, and after bowing, left to head back to Hogwarts.

November 18th 1995

Even though quidditch had been cancelled, Harry still wanted to keep up his seeking skills, and so he had borrowed a snitch and gone out on his own. Now that all their worries about Voldemort and Lestrange were gone, the Ministry had called back the Aurors and the Dementors, and so Harry was free to roam wherever he wanted. Harry therefore landed close to the Forbidden Forest to take a breather. He had barely touched down when he heard a voice saying 'psst'.

Harry swung around to see a bulky figure in the bushes. "Hagrid?"

"I have something yeh might like to see," Hagrid whispered as he beckoned to Harry, who headed into the Forest to join his large friend.

The two chatted amicably as they walked along in the Forbidden Forest until all of a sudden a jet of flame shot out from some bushes and Harry found himself being forcibly pushed over. When he looked up, Hagrid was standing over him and holding out his hand. "Sorry about that."

"What was that?" Harry asked, brushing himself off.

"Yeh'll find out," Hagrid said mysteriously, and he led the way through the thickets.

Harry's mouth fell open when he spotted four dragons, but his face lit up when he spotted a familiar face. "Charlie!"

Charlie passed his gloves to Tula and came running over. "Harry, Hagrid said he would let me know if he saw you. What do you think?"

Harry stared in amazement at the four dragons that were being settled in. "Are they here for the tournament?"

"Yes," Charlie said grinning. "Aren't they beautiful?"

Beautiful wasn't the first word that came to Harry's mind. "Scary, Charlie! They look scary."

"The most dangerous one is the Hungarian Horntail," Charlie informed him, smiling as though it was something cute to be cuddled. "But she's gorgeous and my favorite."

"Isn't that one a Chinese Fireball?" Harry asked, recalling some of what Charlie had taught him when he had stayed with him at the Reserve.

"She is," Charlie said, smiling again. "And that one is a Welsh Green. They're a lot more common than the other two but still pretty ferocious."

Harry pointed to the last dragon. "And that one?"

"A Romanian Longhorn," Charlie told him. "I thought you might have recognized her."

Harry's mouth fell open in shock as he looked over at the large dragon that Hagrid had once named Roger. "That's Regina?"

"Yes, she's grown a bit, hasn't she," Charlie said as he began to walk away from the dragons.

"I now really wish my name hadn't come out of the Goblet," Harry said, shivering. "Which one will I be going up against?"

"That won't be decided until tomorrow, just before the contest starts," Charlie informed him. "You'll be cheering George on, won't you, given that you're both representing Hogwarts?"

"Of course I will," Harry promised. "Does he know about the dragons?"

Charlie shook his head. "No, and Hagrid was supposed to take you to his hut for us to meet up and not bring you here."

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone at school," Harry said, a smirk playing across his lips. "Well, except for George."

"So how is school?" a now smiling Charlie asked, changing the subject and walking Harry away from the enclosures, not wanting him to get burnt if something untoward happened.

"Same old, same old," Harry said offhandedly. "But things are definitely getting harder with OWLs on the horizon."

Charlie smiled at Harry. "I expect Hermione is all geared up for it."

Harry grimaced. "She's used Luna's birthday gift of lots of different colored paper to make homework calendars for all of us, and I'm sometimes afraid to go into the library. George and Fred keep hiding."

Charlie laughed. "I'm glad I'm done with all that." He then became serious. "Is there anything you need?"

Harry shook his head. "As I told you in my last letter, your parents and Remus are all taking good care of me."

Charlie was pleased to hear it, and remained on the subject of Remus with his next comment. "I was surprised to hear that Binns had vanished and Remus has taken his position."

"I'm glad. Having Remus teach the class makes a massive difference." Harry had to admit the classes had become far more interesting since Binns had mysteriously vanished, only Harry and Hermione aware that Remus had somehow done it. "And I might actually get a decent mark in my OWLs because I can stay awake."

"Charlie!" a voice called over.

Charlie waved to say he would be back. "I have to go, Harry."

"You won't leave without saying goodbye, will you?" Harry asked, relishing what little time he had with Charlie.

"Of course not," Charlie promised, and he ruffled Harry's hair. "You're as big as me now, or at least as tall as me. Not quite as brawny though."

"I'll get there." Harry grinned as Charlie started to walk off. Looking up, Harry spotted a clearing in the trees, and mounting his broomstick, he shot off back towards school.

It came as no surprise to Harry, who had told George what to expect, when George easily won the first round of the Triwizard Tournament, using a combination of a noise spell, and a mix of a confundus charm and a conjunctivitis spell, to distract the dragon he was trying to steal a golden egg from, the Hungarian Horntail. Jacob had finished last, getting his leg burnt, and Natasha had fared little better.

Harry had finished second after surprising everyone, including Harry himself, when Regina had suddenly rolled over and made a strange clicking sound. Recalling what had happened when the dragon had been a baby Harry had tentatively, and with many intakes of breaths from the audience, approached the dragon, before tickling the soft spot on her belly. After a few minutes, Regina's eyes had closed, and a few minutes after that, a sound like a snore had been heard.

Harry had slowly backed off and grabbed an egg, but somehow Regina knew and she woke up. She hadn't taken too kindly to Harry stealing what she thought was one of her eggs, and their touching reunion came to a swift end, Regina trying to smash into Harry with her tail, clipping his shoulder and making him lose points. Harry had simply been relieved that he had finished in one piece, as had Remus, who was now back in Hogwarts and had replaced Binns, who had mysteriously vanished.

After the first task it had been announced that this year's Yule Ball was to be for fourth years and above, and was specifically for couples. All those unable or not wanting to attend would be treated to a feast in their respective common rooms. Hermione thought it over for several weeks after the announcement, and given that she had yet to be asked by anyone, Hermione decided to ask Harry to go with her. Therefore, when he made an appearance in the library

late on a Saturday evening, she waited for him to sit down before quietly asking, "Harry, do you want to go to the Ball with me?"

Harry looked at Hermione as if she had grown a second head. "You want to go with me?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes, I thought that seeing as you're my friend and you don't have anyone to go with and I don't, I thought we could go together."

"Oh," Harry managed, Hermione's offer having totally taken him aback. "Um..."

"Harry, if you've found someone to go with then just tell me," Hermione said impatiently, nerves making her brusquer than she had intended.

Aware that Hermione was glaring at him, Harry shook himself. "I haven't, and, yes, I'd like to go with you."

"Then it's a date." Hermione kissed Harry's cheek and walked off, leaving a slightly bemused Harry behind.

Sitting on a table across the room, Ginny had overheard the end of the conversation, seen Hermione's brief kiss and presumed the worst. "She won't treat him properly."

Fred sighed out loud. After Ginny's falling out with Harry, Fred had supported Ginny at first, understanding how much his sister had worshipped Harry, but even he was fed up with Ginny constantly whinging about the boy. "Look, Ginny, get over it. It's your own fault. You didn't trust him and so he's moved on."

"I was angry," Ginny said in her own defense. "I didn't really mean what I said."

Fred was not sure he actually believed this, but he gave his sister the benefit of the doubt. "That might be so, but given that Harry is never going to be interested in you again, particularly after what you said, why don't you just let this drop?"

"Because she's got him and he's in the Tournament – it isn't fair," Ginny grumbled. "Couldn't he at least have let George have that?"

"You read Mum's letter," Fred said, not truly believing that George was Ginny's main concern. "It wasn't Harry's fault about the Tournament and George doesn't care that Harry's in the Tournament, especially as Harry gave him the heads up about the dragons even when our own brother didn't."

"I suppose," Ginny reluctantly admitted, having to own to herself that Harry still hated the limelight and would never have dreamed of entering himself into the Tournament. "But..."

"Ginny, there are no buts. Just get over it," Fred snapped, before he apologized. "Sorry, Gin, but you did bring this on yourself."

Ginny sighed. "I know but I've done everything I can think of to make it up to Harry."

"I don't think you can make it up to him," Fred told her, before piling up his books. "I'm afraid it's your bed and you have to lie on it."

Ginny miserably watched her brother walk off, aware that he was telling the truth.

11th December 1995

Albus was trembling as he was led from his cell. Because of what had happened to Minerva, his appeal had been delayed as most of the Wizengamot had been at Hogwarts to attend her funeral and this had been the first available revised date.

Sitting across from the man, Sirius suspected that the Wizengamot had deliberately put it off for as long as they could, but that was neither here nor there. All that mattered was that he had a chance of escaping, and as Albus was led out, Sirius prayed he was right.

Having no idea that Ignotus was working hard to try to get him a new hearing, Sirius had made the decision to escape after reading about Harry's inclusion in the Tournament. He had decided to try an idea he had once thought about, but had dismissed as too dangerous. He pretended to go off his food, letting himself get thinner and thinner until he knew he was able to slip through the bars of his cell in his Animagus form. His plan had, however, been delayed when Fudge's visit had been cancelled, stopping him from leaving three weeks

earlier, and so he had had to postpone his escape until the day of Dumbledore's appeal.

Sirius' stomach lurched and his mind was pulled back to the present as Dumbledore's cell door shut to, and the moment the last Auror had turned his back to leave, Sirius transformed, squeezing painfully through the bars of his cell. He had just made it out of the main door when a clang signaled the release of the Dementors. Sticking to the shadows as he headed for the exit, Sirius shivered as the Dementors passed so close to him that if he had wagged his tail too hard he would have touched them. Not wanting to get left behind, he tried to ignore the need to curl up and hide, instead following as closely as he could to the Aurors leading out Dumbledore.

It was a long and anxiety filled journey, but within ten minutes, Sirius found himself slipping out of the last door, the door that led to the pathway to the docks. He ignored the yells that broke out as he sprinted past the Aurors, none of them able to figure out from where the stray dog had come. Soon their cries died away and Sirius found himself on the docks, faced by a sizeable boat that was tied up at the quayside, and after furtively looking around, he slipped onto the quayside and leapt into the boat, before transforming and making his way below.

On arriving at the boat, Aurors began a search for the dog, believing it to belong to a guard at Azkaban and not wanting what might be a vicious animal onboard. But none of them looked beyond locked doors or below hatches; dogs had paws, not hands. Once it was ascertained that the dog had not made its way onto the boat, they set sail. In the bowels of the boat, Sirius shivered as he heard the engine start up.

The Ministry of Magic

A somewhat disheveled and confused Albus was led into the courtroom, barely registering when Tiberius Ogden joined them and brought the court into session.

Unlike the previous court appearance, this time Harry was far from intimidated by Albus Dumbledore, although he was shocked by how awful the former headmaster looked. Tiberius turned to Harry as the matter progressed. "You've heard that there is no new evidence to

support Albus Dumbledore's application. Do you wish for the sentence to remain unchanged?"

Harry stood up. "Can I talk to him before I answer the question, Sir?"

"You may," Tiberius said, indicating that Harry could approach Dumbledore.

Harry neared the Headmaster. "Sir, do you still believe you did the right thing by leaving me with my relatives?"

Albus peered at Harry. "Who are you?"

"Harry Potter," Harry said softly. "Don't you remember? You left me with my relatives when I was baby."

Albus' eyes became a little more focused. "You're James' boy, aren't you?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, Sir."

"You've grown up to look like him," Albus declared, his eyes growing misty. "James was such a good boy."

Harry was well aware that Veritaserum had been administered to Albus but he still decided to check to see if the man was playacting. "Do you like me, Sir?"

Albus shrugged. "I don't really know you, but I might."

Harry took a step backwards as he realized that Albus had already forgotten that he had Harry identified as James' son. "I haven't got anything else to ask."

Tiberius could see that Harry was shocked. "Having spoken to Albus Dumbledore, do you wish for the sentence to be changed?"

Harry glanced over at Albus, who was playing with his beard and singing softly, before slowly nodding. "I do."

Tiberius had expected this given the state of Albus. "What would you recommend, Mr. Potter?"

Harry took a deep breath before announcing what he thought was fair. "Mr. Dumbledore doesn't seem to even know who I am. I think he should be released from Azkaban but should still have to wear the bracelet."

Tiberius was unsurprised by Harry relenting. "I concur, Mr. Potter. Mr. Dumbledore will therefore be remanded in St. Mungo's long injuries term ward until he is deemed to fit to leave. When he is, then we will review removing the bracelet. However, an order will be put in his place banning him from approaching you."

As Albus was led out of the courtroom, Sirius was making his way to Hogwarts. He had no idea how long it would take him to reach Hogwarts on foot nor did he have any idea what a bad idea going to the school was going to be for him.

21st December 1995

Severus heard a noise below him and started. Then he cursed himself; the full moon wasn't up for several weeks, but his former experience with Lupin had meant that Severus' journeys into the Forest Forbidden to collect plants still weren't entirely comfortable. As the rustle came again, Severus looked down and almost fell off his broomstick in shock.

In the undergrowth below, Sirius had no idea that he was being watched. He therefore didn't see the spell that came from above and hit him, sending him hurtling unconscious to the ground.

Severus landed beside Sirius, staring down at his former childhood nemesis, now lying prone on the ground. He aimed his wand at the unconscious man, toying with the idea that he could just kill him rather than handing him back to the authorities. Then a better notion presented itself; he could hand Black over to Tom. Severus knew that it would make him seem even more loyal, as well as elevating him above Lucius in Tom's eyes. After giving Sirius a vicious kick to the head, Severus cast a spell to float him along until they reached the edge of the school wards, and then they both disappeared.

Next Chapter: The Yule Ball doesn't go well for Harry.

Chapter 39: The Yule Ball

Justin finished helping Harry tie his bow tie. "Do you have the corsage for Hermione?"

Harry scowled. "It's really stupid."

Justin picked up the box that Harry was ignoring. "It's traditional, Harry. The Muggle world might be into discos and all that, but you know as well as I do that here it's more about old-fashioned values."

"And it's stupid," Harry repeated.

Across the room, Ernie grinned at him. "And yet you're still doing it." He then left the room.

Justin grinned at Harry. "Ernie made a good point."

"Luna said that Hermione would be upset if I didn't," Harry reminded him, grabbing the box that contained the flower he had purchased in Hogsmeade a few days earlier.

"And she would be," Justin told him, before frowning and hesitantly bringing up his date again. "You're really sure you don't mind me having Bethany and her friends sit with us?" Bethany Chivers was Justin's girlfriend, a sixth year Ravenclaw and fellow Muggleborn, who he had gotten together with a few weeks earlier after they had both wanted to use the same book in the library and had agreed to share it to do their homework.

"Of course not," Harry said for about the tenth time. "Anyway, let's shake a tail and get moving, otherwise we're going to be late."

The two boys joined Susan in the common room, before meeting Ron, Parvati and Luna outside the Great Hall. Hermione was running late, and so Harry told the others to go on while he waited for her, Luna waiting with him for George, having agreed to accompany him when Katie had finished with George a week earlier.

Harry forgot that Luna was standing next to him when Hermione appeared, and his mouth went dry, as it was clear that she had still made a huge effort. Her hair had been teased in pretty curls that framed her lightly made up face and the brown silk dress she was

wearing hugged her body in all the right places. And as she reached his side, Harry wanted nothing more than to take Hermione into his arms and kiss her, but almost too afraid to touch her, he instead offered her the single white rose he had chosen for her. "Um, we have to wait for all the Champions to get here so that we can have the first dance."

Hermione hid her disappointment at Harry's failure to compliment her on her outfit. "Okay."

George arrived a few moments later and nodded to all those there, before offering his arm to Luna. Then they were told to go in, and Harry said nothing to Hermione as he danced with her, as his body reacting in a manner he would rather it didn't and he was currently concentrating on trying to get it to stop. It was only after he sat down with Hermione and had taken a drink of the punch that had been placed on the table, when he overheard Susan mention how pretty Natasha Vladimir looked that Harry was hit with the realization that he had failed to tell Hermione how nice she looked. Deciding that he should do so, Harry's nerves made him botch it, his compliment actually sounding more than a little begrudging. "I've just realized that I didn't tell you how nice you looked tonight. The dress is, er, pretty."

Rather disillusioned by Harry's lukewarm offering, Hermione brushed it off. "It's nothing special."

"It suits you," Harry said in an offhand fashion before turning to Justin to talk about quidditch, unaware that Hermione had perceived his nerves as a lack of attention and that she was rather upset by it.

Harry's failure to pay the kind of attention Hermione was seeking continued until George came over to the table where they were sitting. Half expecting George to speak to Ron, Hermione was rather taken aback when he instead bowed slightly to her and held out his hand. "Can I have this dance?"

Hermione got up and joined George. "I'm surprised that you're dancing at all. Fred has barely moved all night."

"Unlike my lazy twin, I listen to what Mum says, and she'd always said that it's polite to dance with all the ladies with whom I'm acquainted," George said in a slightly pompous voice sounding a bit

like Percy but he was grinning as he spoke. "Harry doesn't mind, does he? He doesn't look very happy."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked in confusion. "Harry and I aren't dating."

"You're not?" George asked in surprise, recalling what Fred said he had seen in the library. "But I thought..."

Hermione put paid to George's thoughts. "You thought wrong, George. We came here as friends."

George glanced over at Harry. "Then why is he watching us like a hawk?"

Hermione glanced behind her to discover that Harry was watching their every move. After his decidedly unenthusiastic attitude that evening, she went with the only reason she could think of for his scrutiny. "I think he's probably just trying to work out how to dance."

"Dance?" George asked.

"Just like Fred, he's sat out every dance," Hermione said in a slightly miserable voice, "apart from the first dance of course."

George gave Hermione a consolatory look. "You like him, don't you?"

Hermione nodded and confessed. "Yes. I've liked him for a while now, ever since we were stuck in the Chamber together but he was dating Hannah back then. And enough time had passed when the Ball came up, and so it seemed the right moment to ask him to come with me, but I chickened out and asked him to come as my friend instead. But he's ignored me for the most of the night, so I don't think he likes me like a girlfriend."

George glanced at Harry yet again and he noted that Harry was definitely watching them closely, and it wasn't their feet he was looking at. "I think you might be wrong, Hermione. He's still watching us."

"He's probably bored," Hermione said, finding it hard to believe that Harry was interested in her after his lukewarm reception of her outfit.

"I doubt it," George said before making a suggestion. "Why don't you ask him to dance instead of waiting for him to ask you?"

Hermione was about to comment when the music came to an end, and so she said nothing as George led her back to sit down. "Thank you for the dance."

"I enjoyed it." George then nodded politely at Harry and walked away.

As soon as Hermione sat down, Susan pounced on her. "What did he want?"

"Just to have a dance," Hermione said, not revealing what they had discussed. She was rather glad she had not said anything when Harry, who was watching as, across the room, George said something to Luna and she got up and followed him.

Despite her irritation with Harry, Hermione had to smother her laughter at Harry's expression, waiting until George had taken Luna outside before saying teasingly, "If looks could kill, I think George would be dead right now."

"I just don't want George to take advantage of her," Harry said, glaring at the doorway through which the couple had just left.

"Don't get worrying," Hermione told him. "Luna and he are just friends."

"I suppose, but I'm still worried in case George tries anything on with her," Harry said in return, bolstering Hermione's belief that Harry was worrying on his best friend's behalf. "He's a lot older than Luna."

"I'll hex him into next year if he does anything to hurt her," Hermione said in a pleasant voice that belied her forceful words. "But George isn't like that, and you know it. Knowing him, he's probably taken her outside to go over another spell from Luna's mother's book."

Harry smiled ruefully at his friend. "I know but I still worry about Luna."

"Luna can take care of herself, Harry! She's fifteen, not five," Hermione said a little impatiently, before deciding to go for broke as George had suggested, and so she held out her hand. "Do you want to dance with me?"

"I'm not really in the mood," Harry said, disappointing Hermione.

Unable to miss the frustrated look on Hermione's face, Susan nudged her boyfriend and Neville dutifully stood up. "I'll dance with you, Hermione."

Hermione rose to her feet and took Neville up on his offer. "Thank you."

Susan turned on Harry the moment the couple was out of earshot. "Harry, it's almost the end of the night and you've only had one dance with Hermione."

"I don't like dancing much," Harry said in justification of his failure to interact with Hermione more.

"And neither does Neville but he's danced with her twice," Susan pointed out, "as has Ron and Justin, and you're the one who's supposed to be her date!"

It was this comment that drove it home to Harry that his trying to avoid being so close to Hermione might be perceived as being boorish. "I'll dance with her when she comes back."

Harry was as good as his word but even as they danced, he could tell that Hermione was distracted. "What's up?"

Hermione had been unable to hear Susan but she had been able to see her face. "You didn't really want to dance with me, did you?"

"I'm sorry," Harry apologized. "I didn't mean to be so rude and ignore you but I was worried about Luna."

Hermione decided it would just cause waves if she pointed out that George had only just taken Luna outside, and that Harry had been ignoring Hermione for most of the night. "She'll be fine, Harry."

"I suppose," Harry said as he returned Hermione to the table. Then, after watching her dance with Justin and then Ron again, Harry realized that he should really dance the final dance with Hermione, and so he reluctantly stood up, holding out his hand. "Would you like to dance?"

Half of Hermione wanted to tell Harry to go to hell and half of her wanted to dance with him. Her more needy side won out, and so she took his hand and let him lead her out onto the dance floor. Once there, she moved closer to him.

Harry's nerves went into overdrive. He was now made aware of how warm Hermione was, of where her dress was showing the skin of her creamy shoulders and of how good her hair smelt as it was just under his nose.

Quite a few of the couples around him were taking advantage of this being the final dance and were not only holding their partners close but were also indulging in a goodnight kiss. However Harry was far too afraid of what might happen if he gave into his feelings and kissed Hermione, and he was also afraid that she would not welcome his attentions. So instead, he continued to hold her slightly away from his body, ignoring the little voice that demanded he do more. And when the dance had ended, he simply took her back to the staircase where he had met her and wished her goodnight.

He had barely stepped foot back inside Hufflepuff when Justin dragged him into the corridor and opened up the hidden passageway before pulling Harry inside and closing it. Then he turned on his friend. "What the hell were you doing tonight?"

Harry was rather taken aback at Justin's attack on him. "What are you going on about?"

"Hermione really likes you, Harry," Justin told his friend.

"No, she doesn't," Harry said in protestation.

Justin could have happily bounced Harry's head off the wall for his obtuseness. "Yes, she does. Both Hannah and Luna told me that Hermione spent ages trying to find the right dress and shoes, and then going as far as letting Parvati style her hair, and it was all for you."

Harry had had no idea of the lengths Hermione had gone to, and he was still amazed that Hermione might like him. "She likes me that much?"

"Yes, you idiot, and you blew it!" Justin exclaimed in exasperation.

Harry sagged against the wall and slipped down to the ground, before making a confession. "Even if I'd known she actually liked me it wouldn't have mattered. I'd have still blown it."

Justin cast a cushioning charm and sat down next to Harry. "What are you going on about?"

Harry went red in the light of the torches that were burning in the passageway. "Do you remember the problem I had on the broomstick when I took Hermione flying at the Potter Estate?"

Now Justin finally understood. "Oh!"

"Exactly!" Harry exclaimed. "I honestly wanted nothing more than to kiss Hermione but I was too afraid of embarrassing myself."

"Then you should try thinking about something horrible," Justin suggested. "Maybe You-Know-Who exploding or something."

Harry grimaced. "That's disgusting."

"But it should have the desired effect," Justin told him. "Believe me I know." He grinned at Harry. "I think about Bulstrode."

Harry's mouth fell open. "Have you and Bethany...?"

Justin shook his head. "No way!" Then he let out a long sigh. "But I'd lying if I said I didn't want to go that far."

"Justin, you've only been going out together for four weeks!" Harry said in a somewhat surprised voice.

"I know exactly how long we've been dating, and I also know that nothing is ever going to happen between us yet," Justin countered. "But that doesn't stop me wanting to take things further when we've kissed."

"Just be careful," Harry warned.

A little irritated by Harry's tone, Justin scowled at him. "You're one to talk. You can't tell me that you and Hannah just held hands when you went out."

Harry winced as the comment hit home. "No, we didn't, but I had been going out with her for almost a year before things got more serious." Then he scowled. "Not that I really want to talk about her - Hannah has nothing to do with my blowing it with Hermione."

Justin realized he had come down rather hard on his friend and he held out his hand. "I'm sorry, you're right. And it's none of my business what you did or might do with either of them."

Harry shook the proffered hand. "True, but I asked you first about Bethany and I had no right to warn you off, so I'm sorry as well."

"Hey, it's okay, Harry," Justin said. "I know you're just concerned about me, just as I am about you."

Harry sighed. "Thanks, and you were right. I should have treated Hermione better tonight."

"I'm not going to argue with that," Justin said, agreeing totally with Harry. "But at least I understand why you behaved as you did, although I doubt you could tell Hermione what your problem was."

Harry groaned loudly. "Not a chance. And I'd rather she thought I was rude than realize the truth."

"Yep, not exactly something you can tell a girl," Justin remarked, a grin settling across his features. "Let's go see if there's any hot chocolate left out there, and then head for bed."

"Good idea," Harry said, deciding to try and forget about the evening.

Hoping that no-one was on the other side of the wall, the two boys slipped back out in the Hufflepuff corridor and headed for the common room.

22nd December 1995

Fed up with Ginny glaring at him, Harry stood up after he had finished playing a game of chess with Ron, and headed over to where the scowling girl was sitting. "Ginny, can I speak to you alone?"

Ginny wondered what Harry wanted, as the two of them barely looked at each other anymore, let alone had something to talk about in private. But curious to find out what he wanted, she agreed and followed him up to the room he shared with Ron. "What do you want, Harry?"

"It's about me being here," Harry began, and he watched realization begin to dawn on Ginny's face. "Your constant rudeness towards me is making things hard on Aunt Molly and Uncle Arthur, and I don't think it's fair, Ginny."

"You're the one who doesn't want to speak to me," Ginny pointed out.

"But I'm not the one who keeps making pointed remarks or throwing dirty looks," Harry countered. "Look, I'll be blunt, Ginny. I meant what I said about not being your friend again, and no matter what you do or say, that won't change..."

"There's a surprise!" Ginny snapped bitterly, interrupting Harry.

Harry held up both hands. "Will you please let me finish?"

Ginny subsided but she folded her arms and wore an implacable look. "So go ahead, say whatever it is you have to say."

Harry half regretted even bothering to try to do what he was about to do, but it was not for him he was doing it. "As I said, your parents are the ones who are suffering for our disagreement, and for their sakes, I'm willing to call a truce, if you will. If you can't, then I'm going to have to go back to Remus' home, and you know as well as I do that your mother and Ron will end up following on Christmas Day and it won't be the same for them, particularly as Bill and Charlie can't make it home for Christmas this year."

Up until that moment, Ginny had not realized how much Harry even doing this meant to her, and she would have told anyone who asked

that she no longer wanted to be his friend. However, she knew in that moment that although Harry had not offered to be her friend, a truce was better than nothing, and Harry was right, her bitchiness towards him was ruining things for her parents, who she did care deeply about. "I think that's a good idea."

"Thank you," Harry said, and he opened the door. "I think we'd better go down now though before your parents think I've done something terrible to you."

Ginny gave Harry a brief smile, an actual genuine smile. "Come on then."

Molly said a quiet prayer to herself when she saw that Harry and Ginny had not ripped each other apart, and instead seemed to have come to some sort of agreement, and she started to set the table for dinner, thankful that harmony once again seemed to reign in everyone's lives, a harmony that was shortly going to be shattered.

Malfoy Manor

Sirius got up from the bed as two masked men entered his surprisingly opulent, but inescapable, guestroom. "I don't know who you are, or what you want with me, but I won't join you, no matter what you do to me."

"I don't want you to join anyone." Tom smirked behind his mask. "I just want you to kill a few Muggles for me, at least for starters."

Sirius raised an eyebrow, well aware that his next words would irritate the man behind the mask. "And if I refuse?"

"Crucio," Tom screamed out as he aimed his wand at Sirius.

As the spell was dropped, Sirius shook himself and lifted his head. "That's not exactly the best way to persuade someone, now is it?"

"Let's try another way," Tom said as he took aim again, while trying to curb his anger at Sirius. "Imperio."

Almost immediately Sirius began to fight Tom's voice telling him what he was going to do, and within a few moments, he had shaken free of the spell. "That isn't going to work either."

"Imperio!" Tom put more power behind the spell this time, but again Sirius easily managed to fight it off, not revealing to Tom that his family ring had enabled him to do so.

"Like I said, it isn't going to work," Sirius said smugly.

Tom decided to try another way and he aimed his wand at Sirius' right leg. "Fracto Talus."

Sirius screamed out in agony as his ankle snapped, but he still didn't give in. "You can do what you want to me but I still won't help you."

"Let's leave you in pain for a few days," Tom said. "Let's see how you feel about helping me then." After leaving the room, Tom ripped off his mask and turned angrily to Severus. "He's to receive no meals for a few days. He has a bathroom if he wants water, if he can get there of course."

Severus removed his own mask as he passed on his opinion. "I know he won't change his mind, no matter how many bones you break or meals you deprive him of."

"Maybe so, but it will teach him to cross me," Tom answered in a tight voice. "Since the Imperius curse doesn't work on Black, I want you to make me the Imperius potion."

"It will take some time to make, three to four weeks depending on the potency of the ingredients," Severus responded. Unlike the Imperius curse, which was fairly easy to master, the Imperius potion was an illegal potion that was difficult to brew, but Severus had made it several times and he was more than confident in his own abilities. "And I'll need some of your blood as well as Black's to make it."

Tom held out his arm indicating his permission. "Do you have a vial?"

"Of course." Severus withdrew one from his cloak, and painlessly spelled the blood he needed from Tom's arm. "Do you want me to go and get some of Black's blood now?"

"Yes, but knock him out first." Tom wasn't going to give warning to Sirius of what he was planning. The difficult-to-make potion strangely worked best if taken with food, and he didn't want Sirius starving himself to stop the potion being administered. "Once the potion is ready, I want it inserted in his food over the space of three days, and then you can contact me to let me know it's been done." Tom slipped his mask back on. "And don't mess up Black too much when you're collecting his blood."

Severus recognized a dismissal when he heard one, and he therefore re-entered Sirius' room. When he finally left it, Sirius had a broken rib and a missing tooth in addition to his broken ankle. Deciding that he had better let Lucius know what was happening, Severus headed in search of the owner of Malfoy Manor.

January 10th 1996

Tom headed to sit down in front of the fire, his mind going over two visits he had paid that day in preparation for the upcoming attacks he had got planned. He absently glanced up when he heard a door opening. "Lucius, what are you doing here?"

"Narcissa is entertaining," Lucius said as he pulled a face. "So I thought I'd spare myself the agonies of having to pretend to care about her friends and report in on my findings."

Tom was well aware that Lucius didn't like his wife, and he ran with the change of subject. "So how did your visits go yesterday?"

"I easily tracked down Bones' home," Lucius told him. "It's in the wizarding section of Barnett Street in London. There are some wards around it but nothing insurmountable."

"And Lovegood's workplace?" Tom asked.

"Nothing at all," Lucius said in a disdainful voice. "The place is a pigsty, and I do believe we'll be doing the wizarding world a favor when we burn it down."

"Quite so." Tom smiled. "And what's left of Potter's relatives?"

"I have been unable to track them down at all," Lucius had to admit. "I know that their names must have been changed."

Tom agreed. "Someone must know where they are."

"If they do, they aren't on our side," Lucius came back. "Perhaps it might be better if we didn't hunt them down. They did hurt Potter."

"It's a pity they didn't kill him, then we wouldn't have to be doing this," Tom said in a disgruntled voice.

"May I ask something?" Lucius asked in a polite voice.

"Of course," Tom said, already suspecting what Lucius was going to ask.

"Why are we even bothering to attack Potter's friends and former family?"

"Because it's the sort of petty attack that Voldemort would have carried out in the name of vengeance," Tom said. "And I want everyone to think Black did it in Voldemort's name before I hand Black over to the authorities, and thereby rid myself of him, a few Mudbloods and Muggles at the same time, as well as providing a blow to Potter's morale."

"But Potter has never done anything to go against you," Lucius pointed out, still not quite understanding why Tom was going after him.

"There's a prophecy in existence, one that states he will bring me down," Tom revealed. "So he gets to die, his friends get to die and so does Black."

Not daring to push his luck by asking any further questions, Lucius changed the subject. "How did your own visits go?"

"I found Granger's parents' workplace, and I've also had a guided tour of Fletchley's home; it's rather large and grand for a Muggle." He could see that Lucius was still thrown that Tom had done some of the legwork himself. "I know you think it strange that I went but I can't sit around idle as Voldemort did, letting everyone fawn around me."

"Does this mean that you will also be leading one of the attacks?" Lucius asked, Voldemort not always having done so in the past.

Tom nodded. "I've decided to lead the one on the Fletchley house. I met its master, and he's an arrogant Muggle bastard who deserves to die."

Lucius wondered what the man had done to piss Tom off. "And what about the Grangers?"

Tom decided that Lucius could deal with them. "When the time comes, you can kill them."

"So when do you plan to attack Fletchley's house?" Lucius asked, returning to the subject of Justin and his family home.

"Sooner rather than later, especially now that I have Sirius Black to blame my attack on." Tom began to mull over when would be good. "But first we need to discuss how recruitment is coming along..."

Next Chapter: Harry's friends are hit hard.

Chapter 40: A Very Black Day

Warning: This chapter contains an attempted rape scene but it is not explicitly graphic.

January 27th 1996

Sirius put down the book he had been reading when Tom came into the room. "It's been a while."

"I decided to wait until the time was right to strike and I've decided that the time is now," Tom said, revealing why he hadn't been in to see Sirius since he had broken Sirius' ankle.

Sirius picked the book back up. "I'm not helping you."

"Oh, I think you will," Tom told him.

Sirius turned his back on Tom as a house-elf appeared with his dinner. "Forgive me if I refuse but my dinner is getting cold."

"By all means, enjoy it," Tom said as he walked back towards the door and made a hollow threat. "It might be the last one you get for some time."

Sirius refrained from throwing his book at the back of Tom's head, aware that it would only earn him a bout under the Cruciatus if he did. Instead, he made sure that he ate everything in front of him, not wanting to be starved as he had been on several occasions.

The Next Morning

Tom greeted Sirius brightly. "Good morning, Sirius."

"Is it?" Sirius answered belligerently, having slept poorly.

"It will be," Tom responded, his voice still chipper. "Today you are going to destroy what's left of your godson's family."

Sirius refused to help as he had the previous day. "I don't think so."

Again a house-elf appeared, this time with breakfast, and Sirius sat down at the table to eat.

"Did you enjoy your dinner?" Tom asked, as Sirius ignored him and tucked into his food.

Sirius immediately became suspicious and dropped his fork. "Why?"

"It was laced with Imperius potion," Tom said as he grinned behind his gold mask, although his glee was evident from his voice. "And what's more, it was keyed to me."

Sirius paled at the ramifications of this statement. "You bastard!"

"I'm going to let that one go, as I need you in perfect condition today." Tom reached into his cloak, withdrawing a wand, and then handing it over to Sirius. "This is for you. You are not to use it on me."

Sirius took the wand, which replaced the trainer wand he had been granted in order to use the bathroom, and tried aiming it at Tom but failed. "You can't do this."

"But I can," Tom informed him and he circled Sirius. "You have to admire the Imperius potion. It's hellishly difficult to brew but if administered correctly, it means that a person is powerless to fight against it."

"I know how it works." Sirius had taken Newt potions. "And I will do my best to fight it."

"You've just proved you can't," Tom pointed out.

"I won't do as you ask," Sirius ground out.

"Oh, but you will," Tom said as he attempted to take Sirius' arm.

Sirius pulled free. "Why aren't you doing this yourself? Too afraid you might get hurt? You've already proved that you're a coward by hiding behind that mask."

Tom did not try to regain his hold on Sirius nor did he allow himself to get angry. "On the contrary, I am going to be carrying out one of the attacks myself. And as for the mask, I want your face to be the one that takes responsibility. You see I'm not ready for the world to

know I exist just yet. I want to preserve the element of surprise until I'm ready."

"Ready for what?" Sirius demanded to know.

"To take my position as leader of the wizarding world," Tom said as if it should have been obvious. "After I kill your godson, of course."

"You son of a bitch!" Sirius lashed out with his fist, surprising Tom, who doubled up as the blow connected with his torso.

As he went down, Tom fumbled with his wand and gasped out, "Stupefy."

Sirius joined Tom on the floor.

After getting his breath back, Tom rolled to his feet and walked out of the room. When he returned, the spell he had cast on Sirius had worn off and Sirius was sitting on the bed. "You will pay for what you did later, Black, but right now we have things to do."

"I'm not helping you to destroy my godson," Sirius said as he snapped the wand in his hand, having already tried to apparate out of the room and having failed. "So go to hell."

Tom itched to use the Cruciatus on Sirius but he didn't need a twitching and injured man at that moment, and time was running short as the other attacks he had planned were about to take place. "I have another wand you can use. You won't damage it and you will also never lay a finger on me again. Now get up."

Sirius found himself reluctantly rising to his feet against his will. "I won't hurt Harry."

"Harry isn't today's target, just his and his friends' families are," Tom said, letting Sirius in on the entirety of the plan. "Now let's go."

Sirius' arm was taken once more, and the two men vanished.

Salford Child Services

Sirius stepped into the outer office he had been directed to by the pretty receptionist. "Where is Timothy Greer?"

"Mr. Greer is on a call," the bored looking blonde girl responded, barely giving Sirius a first glance, let alone a second one. "And he can't be disturbed."

Faced with opposition, Sirius could do little to fight the Imperius potion that was coursing through his veins and he turned the borrowed wand on the girl. "Avada Kedavra." The girl was dead before she even realized that she was going to die.

Sirius then flicked his wand at the door to Greer's office, which flew open to reveal a small, balding man sitting at an enormous wooden desk that dwarfed him. It was instantly obvious to Sirius that the girl he had just killed had been asked to cover for Greer as, rather than being on the phone, the man was instead playing some sort of electronic chess game. Sirius got straight to the point, his wand held out in front of him. "Greer, I want to know where you placed Dudley Dursley."

As a squib, Greer recognized a wand when he saw one, as well as the man standing in front of him, but instead of running or calling for help, he found himself blurting out, "You're Sirius Black!"

"I am," Sirius said, confirming that Greer had been correct. "Now let's try that again. Where did you place the boy and what is he called now?"

Sirius quickly wrung the answer out of Greer, but he had orders to do more than just that, and Greer's screams soon began to filter down to the other offices in the corridor beyond his. Wondering what was going on, the occupants of those offices spilled out into the dingily lit linoleum clad corridor, and what they saw at the end of it made some of them sick to their stomachs. And, just as Greer had identified Sirius from the Prophet, some of the others did the same, but being Muggles they identified him from Muggle sources, one of the braver ones pointing at Sirius and identifying him. "It's that escaped bloke from off the news, Sirius Black."

As the blood from his slashed throat choked the very last breath out of him, Greer gave one last gurgling moan, before stilling. Tom's final order kicked in now that Sirius had completed his mission: he had the full address of the Dursley boy, he had stayed long enough

to be identified, and he had butchered Greer, so now it was time to leave.

As he walked along the corridor towards the exit, Sirius could barely believe that these people were just going to let him walk past them without trying to stop him, but that was exactly what they did. No-one was brave enough to approach a blood-splattered man who the police had classified as dangerous and shouldn't be approached, especially as Sirius was still holding the knife that he had used to massacre Greer; most there just screamed and ran back into their offices, slamming and locking their doors behind them. But Sirius had no interest in any of them. He would have only had to attack them if they had challenged him, but none did, and so, at the bottom of the staircase, he vanished without any further loss of life.

Tom was waiting for him at the agreed apparition point and he got straight to the point. "Tell me where the Dursley boy lives and what his new name is."

Sirius spat out the information, unable to stop the words from leaving his mouth. "He lives at 24 Derby Road, Salford and his new name is Dudley Ellis."

"That wasn't too difficult, was it?" Tom responded nastily. "Now let's move on."

Sirius bolted, changing into his Animagus form as he did so. Unfortunately he didn't get far and he found himself frozen on the spot, a spell having hit him in the back.

Tom slowly walked over to him. "You will pay for your insubordination later, Black, but for now I need you back in your human form. Homorphus."

Frozen, Sirius couldn't scream out as his body took human form again, the enforced transformation being quite painful. Lying on the ground, unable to move, Sirius was forced to look up into the mask of the man who had just made Sirius take another human life.

Tom knelt down beside Sirius, releasing only his mouth. "Now we are going to pay a visit to Ellis, and if I cannot get through any wards that might be in place, then you will access them. You won't attempt to run away again and you will do as I tell you. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Sirius ground out, before pleading with Tom. "You know I don't want to do this. I'd rather you kill me than help you to harm Harry."

"You don't have any choice in the matter." Tom released the rest of the Sirius' body from the spell and grabbed his arm. "Let's be on our way. I have more work to do yet."

24 Derby Road, Salford

After casting invisibility spells on both himself and Sirius, so as not to draw attention while he worked on the wards Tom had suspected might exist, Tom began to try to get through them, but the wards resisted every attempt he made. Tom knew he could have eventually gotten through by using sheer power, but instead he decided to use the easier option. And so, after releasing the invisibility spell and then using a cleaning spell on Sirius to remove all traces of Greer's blood, Tom pointed in the direction of the house. "Black, go kill Dudley Ellis."

Wanting nothing more than to reduce Tom to a bloody pulp, a little like he had just done to Dudley's caseworker, Sirius instead obeyed the man who had quite prudently made it impossible for Sirius to hurt him or for Sirius to flee, simply by ordering him not to.

After casting another invisibility spell on himself, Tom stood back and watched while, as expected, Sirius walked through the wards without any problem: Sirius really didn't want to hurt Dudley, even given who his mother had been, and the wards recognized this, allowing him through, a flaw in their design. Unfortunately for the boy formerly known as Dudley Dursley, the potion and Tom's orders were going to kick in as soon as Sirius encountered him. But by then it would be too late and Sirius would be well inside the wards, rendering them ineffective. Tom smirked as he thanked the Prophet for printing the details about Harry's court case, information that Tom had used to his advantage in accessing Dudley.

Linda Duval was making the bed in the guest room when the doorbell rang, and so she called out to Dudley, who was in his bedroom, "Dudley, I'm busy. Can you see who that is?"

Dudley, who had gotten up unusually early that morning and was now playing his favorite video game, reluctantly got off his bed and, grumbling, he looked out of the window. He failed to recognize the man standing below at the front door. He yelled back at his foster mother, "I dunno who it is, Lin."

"Well, please go down and ask what he wants," Linda said, wanting to get the room ready for her parents who were due to visit later that day.

Dudley couldn't be bothered to walk downstairs, so he instead leaned out of the window. "Oy, you!"

Sirius looked up. "Who are you?"

Dudley frowned and answered without thinking, "Dudley Ellis."

"That's all I needed to know," Sirius responded and he turned his wand upwards. "Avada Kedavra."

Although he didn't know why he did it, Dudley saved himself by throwing himself backwards onto the floor as the spell exploded against the window frame.

Downstairs, Sirius aimed his wand at the front door to gain entrance. "Reducto."

"Lin!" Dudley screamed, getting to his feet. "We're being burgled. The bloke's got some sort of gun."

The sound of the front door exploding and Dudley's yells compelled Linda into action. Dropping the pillow she had been about to place on the bed, she ran across the landing and into Dudley's room, a bolt of green narrowly missing her as Sirius came up the stairs. Her heart pounding, Linda screeched at Dudley as she ran towards him, her hand outstretched, "Take my hand! Take my hand!"

Dudley thought she was mad. "We have to get out the window. He's going to bloody kill us."

Linda ignored Dudley and grabbed his hand, activating the portkey she had. "Sanctuary Seven."

The pair of them vanished from the house, the Killing Curse that Sirius sent their way passing harmlessly through the space where they had just been standing.

Watching the pair disappear, Sirius smirked, knowing that his failure would irk Tom, even though he suspected that he would pay for it later. And so Sirius began to whistle a jaunty tune as he got closer to where he had left Tom, which he hoped would anger the man.

It did and, after dropping his invisibility spell, Tom scowled behind his mask at the bright smiling face of Sirius Black. "You are far too happy for someone who has just committed a murder he begged me to spare him from doing."

"That's because I didn't murder anyone." Sirius kept on smiling as he spoke.

"That's impossible," Tom snapped out, before testing out the potion's effectiveness. "Kneel and tell me you are my servant."

Sirius did as he was told, grinning as he did so, as although the potion was forcing him to follow Tom's orders, Sirius was able to respond quite literally and in a way he knew would irritate Tom. "You are my servant."

Tom realized he had walked straight into that one, but he forced himself to curb his anger at Sirius' ploy; he was more interested in how the Dursley boy had managed to escape death than he was in Sirius' silliness. "How did the boy survive?"

"He and his guardian portkeyed out of the house before I could kill them." Sirius had little choice but to tell the truth. However, given the pleasure he had felt at being able to annoy Tom, Sirius once again utilized the only weapon he had left: words. "So I do believe that the score stands at one to you for Greer's death and, given what's just happened, I'd say it's also one to whoever set this up. You've been outwitted, whoever you are, so your clever plan isn't so clever now, is it, stupid?"

Tom finally lost his temper at Sirius' slur and he turned his wand on Sirius, uncaring that they were in the middle of a Muggle street. "Crucio."

As Sirius had expected, he was being punished for losing the boy and for the insult he had just paid Tom, but even as he screamed out his pain, Sirius experienced no small amount of pleasure knowing that Tom had been thwarted. However, the pain ended moments later when pops began to sound around them and, aware that it was probably Aurors come to investigate, Tom grabbed Sirius' arm once more, apparating them out before they could be attacked. He still had the Finch-Fletchleys to deal with.

Granger Dentistry, The Palisades, Kent

Virginia Granger frowned as she heard a scream and she excused herself from her patient. "I'll just be a moment." She didn't get a chance to see what was going on, as the trouble came to her. About to leave the room, Virginia's heart leapt into her mouth when her door opened up and she came face to face with a silver-masked man who was carrying a wand, and she began to back up in terror. "Get away from me."

The man ignored Virginia's entreaty and followed her into the room. Once inside, he aimed his wand at the patient in the chair, executing him without fanfare. "Avada Kedavra."

When he turned his wand on her, Virginia screamed and, grabbing a tray of instruments, she threw them at the man.

The man tutted as he advanced on the frightened woman. "That wasn't very nice."

Virginia was now cornered and, having nowhere else to go, she backed towards the far side of the room, her silvery blonde hair falling out from her bun and framing her delicate features, her breasts rising and falling with every frightened breath she took.

Lucius noted that the woman in front of him presented a very desirable picture, and he decided he would have a little fun before he executed her. "You're quite something to look at, my dear." Lucius then took pleasure in frightening Virginia even more by telling her what was going to happen. "Now you can fight me or you can make it easy on yourself by giving me what I want. But either way, it goes without saying that you're going to die, but not before I have you."

As Lucius advanced on her, a terrified Virginia continued to back up until she careened into the long granite counter that ran the length of the room.

Lucius reveled in the power he was feeling and he shook his head at Virginia. "There's nowhere to run."

Lucius' eyes being too firmly fixed on Virginia's heaving breasts, he failed to notice Virginia's hand slip behind her as she desperately tried to find something on the counter to use to defend herself. Wanting to see more, Lucius reached out and tugged open the front of Virginia's white lab coat to reveal a white blouse beneath it. When she made no attempt to stop him, Lucius caressed her cheek. "I'm so that glad you're not going to fight me. It's better this way."

Virginia's mouth was too dry to answer, but she hoped that by letting Lucius take what he wanted, he would miss what she was doing behind her back, especially as he was still clutching his wand.

Her ploy worked. Lucius took little notice of anything else but Virginia's breasts, which he could see through the blouse since Virginia wasn't wearing a bra, and he murmured appreciatively, "Very nice."

Virginia gasped but made no attempt to pull away as Lucius tore open the blouse, exposing her breasts to him.

Already partially aroused, Lucius grew harder as he used his left hand to cup one of Virginia's breasts. Then, believing Virginia to be transfixed with fear, Lucius pushed up her skirt, pressing Virginia more firmly against the counter, before ripping her panties away. And just as Lucius began to unbutton the placket on his trousers, Virginia's fingers finally curled around something she could use: a scalpel.

An unsuspecting Lucius released himself from his trousers and positioned himself between an apparently docile Virginia's legs. "It's been a long time since I've had this kind of fun."

Virginia experienced a wave of nausea. She had never hurt anyone before in her life but she was painfully aware that if she couldn't do what she needed to, then Lucius would rape and then murder her. And so, just as Lucius began to try to push into her, Virginia grasped

the scalpel more firmly, before lifting her arm up and driving the scalpel between Lucius' shoulders.

Taken completely by surprise, Lucius screamed out and backed away from Virginia, dropping his wand before trying desperately to reach the scalpel that was now firmly wedged in the center of his back.

Virginia didn't hesitate to take advantage of the moment and she drove her foot as hard as she could into the gap between Lucius' legs. "Bastard!"

As Lucius collapsed onto the floor, torn between trying to remove the scalpel or cup his testicles, Virginia grabbed his wand off the floor and snapped it in two. Fearful that there might be others outside of her office door, Virginia ran to the window, opened it and slithered out, pulling her skirt down as she landed on the grass outside. She didn't get far as Lucius dragged himself to the window and using his secondary wand took aim. "Avada Kedavra."

Virginia dropped to the floor without a sound.

Hogwarts

When Remus opened the door he found Amelia and Tonks outside, and he knew almost immediately from their faces that something was wrong. "Madam Bones, Auror Solace, what can I do for you?"

"I need to talk to both of you, Professor Lupin," Amelia said as she stepped into the room when Remus stepped aside. "Hello, Harry."

Harry greeted the grave looking Amelia. "Hi, Amelia."

Amelia sat down opposite Harry. "I'm afraid we're here with bad news."

Showing no embarrassment at being in a room with her ex, Julianne gave Remus a gentle smile before sitting by Harry and delivering the bad news herself. "Harry, I'm so very sorry but Marjorie Dursley has been killed."

"Aunt Marge?" Harry asked, even though he knew it was stupid to do so – he only knew of one Marjorie Dursley and it therefore couldn't have been anyone else.

"I'm afraid so," Amelia confirmed. "And it wasn't an accident. She was tortured and then killed, as was your cousin's caseworker."

"Is Dudley okay?" Harry asked, feeling more than a little numb.

"Both he and his new foster mother are safe, although they too were targeted," Amelia told him. "They escaped by means of a portkey."

Harry immediately recalled what he had learnt at the end of his fourth year. "But I thought a portkey could only be used by someone magical."

"Dudley is a squib," Amelia said, revealed a surprising truth about Dudley. "As was his mother."

Harry was more shocked about this than he had been about Aunt Marge's death. "But I thought Mum was a Muggleborn!"

"So did we until Dudley panicked when they were trying to obliviate him of any knowledge of you and the Auror was thrown up against a wall," Amelia said.

Harry frowned. "But you just said he's a squib – he can't do magic."

Remus immediately explained. "Just like distraught magical children who amplify their power when they're distressed, given the situation, I believe Dudley did the same with the little magic he has inside of him."

Harry's eye narrowed. "Did you know that Dudley was a squib?"

Remus shook his head. "No."

"Professor Lupin might be your alternate guardian but he isn't privy to BritAD matters," Amelia said, having sworn the Auror to secrecy. "And this was a BritAD matter."

Harry was satisfied that Remus hadn't hidden the truth from him, and he asked after his cousin. "So where is Dudley now?"

"In a safe house," Amelia said, before going on. "I'm afraid I have more news, Harry. The attacks were carried out by Sirius Black."

It was Remus who took this news the hardest and he took a step backwards as if he had been struck. "Are you sure?"

"I have ten Muggle witnesses who saw him brutally murder Dudley's caseworker before leaving the building and vanishing," Amelia said, very much aware that Remus had once been best friends with Sirius. "I also have a copy of Dudley's memory of the attack on him, and it's definitely Black."

Harry felt horribly guilty. "Black went after Dudley and Aunt Marge because of me, didn't he?"

"We believe so, but I'm afraid that they weren't the only people who were attacked today." Amelia knew the next part was also going to be hard for Remus to hear, and although she didn't like him, she was genuinely sorry about what had happened. "There was also an attack on your home, Professor, and it's been destroyed; the entire block of flats went up in flames actually. Luckily no-one died."

Remus couldn't tell Amelia he had two homes: the main one he kept private, and the one he used publicly, a small flat in a Muggle area. "Thank you for telling me."

Even though he knew it wasn't Remus' main home, Harry still turned an apprehensive face towards him. "I'm really sorry, Remus."

Remus could see that Harry was worried he would blame him. "Harry, it isn't your fault."

"But..." Harry began.

Remus wasn't about to let Harry assume the blame for something he had no control over. "Unless you aimed your wand at my house and set fire to it, then it isn't your fault. My position as your alternate guardian opens me up to attack."

Harry blanched. "The Weasleys!"

Amelia hurried to assure him that they were fine. "Although they were also attacked, Bill Weasley was home on a visit and he quickly erected wards of his own. His attackers soon gave in."

Harry let out a sigh of relief, before his face fell. "They put themselves in danger to help me."

"And I'm quite sure they'd do it every time," Remus told him. "They love you, Harry, and consider you a part of their family, as I do mine."

Harry would have burst into tears if a knock hadn't sounded at the door. Julianne got up and answered to find a fellow colleague there, together with Filius Flitwick. "Madam Bones is in here."

Tonks hurried in. "Ma'am, we've received a Muggle report that a woman has been killed by unknown masked assailants in Kent."

"Who?" Amelia barked out.

"A Dr. Virginia Granger," Tonks hurriedly spat out. "Two staff members and two patients were also killed. However, Dr. Lester Granger survived, and he fled to a police station after the attack and he's still there now."

Harry paled as he worked out who it was that Tonks was talking about. "That's Hermione's parents."

"That's why the report was intercepted," Tonks informed him.

"We need to get her father to safety," Remus declared.

Amelia scowled at him. "I'm in charge, Professor Lupin."

At that moment Remus wished he was wearing his Unspeakable's cloak, although Amelia would still outrank him unless she committed a crime of some sort. "I know the Muggle world well, and..."

"What about my other friends?" Harry anxiously interrupted Remus and Amelia's dispute. "If Hermione's family is being attacked, then everyone else I'm friends with might also be in danger as well."

"Then I'll contact BritAD and arrange for teams of Aurors to go out," Amelia said, only for Filius to step in.

"Both Remus and Severus Snape are au fait with the Muggle world, Madam Bones, and given the need for urgency, they could be dispatched to Harry's Muggle friends' homes within minutes; far quicker than it would take to get your teams together."

Amelia bit her lip as she realized that Filius was right. "Go ahead."

Filius called out to a house-elf named Vickers, giving the house-elf further instructions when it arrived. "Please fetch Professor Snape for me. Tell him it is a matter of extreme urgency."

Amelia made an offer. "I'll authorize them to use any means necessary to defend themselves and their charges."

"And I will set up the fireplace in here for outgoing travel while we wait." Filius headed over to the fireplace in Remus' sitting room to unlock it and to allow free passage to the outside of the school. He wasn't, however, willing to risk the students by allowing anyone free passage back in.

Remus left moments later, together with Julianne Solace, to head for Fletchley Manor. Tonks also left at the same time as Remus and was now on her way with two other Aurors to go to Hannah Abbott's home, as even though she and Harry were no longer dating, he was still worried about her family. After seeing the two available rescue parties on their way, Amelia then used the fireplace to contact BritAD and, within a few minutes, more Aurors were also heading out to the Lovegood home.

When Severus arrived, he found himself volunteered to go to the police station, something he was rather glad about as he didn't want to have to explain to Tom why he was protecting Harry's friends or to come under friendly fire. Clutching the slip of parchment with the address of the police station on it, Severus stepped into the fireplace and called out his destination, before vanishing in a puff of green smoke.

Not knowing what else to do, Harry began pacing the floor, nerves almost overwhelming him. "What happens now?"

Amelia knew that her answer wouldn't be received well, but it was the same with every matter like this. "There's nothing we can do except to wait for news."

Harry felt frustrated by Amelia's answer but Amelia was correct and there wasn't anything Harry could do, except to wait to hear if his friends' families had made it through the day.

Police Station

Almost two hours after he had arrived, just as Lester thought he was going to explode from worry, the door opened yet again and a sour faced man came into the interview room. "Dr. Granger, if you'll come with me."

"Where is my ex-wife? Do you know what's happened to her?" Lester asked, as he followed the man down the corridor.

The man ignored his questions and he wrapped his fingers tightly around Lester's arm. "We're leaving."

"What the hell are you doing?" Lester started to struggle but it was too late and, with a horrible squashing sensation, he was gone from the police station.

When the feeling ended, he found himself standing in the open air, and he swung around with his fist, catching Severus in the face and forcing him to let go of him. "I want to know what you've done with Virginia, you bastard."

Before Lester could lay into a stunned Severus, six wand-toting men came seemingly out of nowhere, the tallest one asking, "Who goes there?"

Lester looked at them in dismay. "Who goes there? What is this - 18th century England?"

"Don't be ridiculous," the man who had taken him snapped as he got to his feet, before addressing the men. "It's Professor Snape and I have Dr. Lester Granger with me."

The men kept their wands trained on the couple and the tallest one spoke again. "Professor Snape, I need a password."

"Invictus." As Severus gave the password, the men faded back into the shadows. He then turned to Lester. "As you may have gathered, I am Professor Snape, and I was asked by the Headmaster of Hogwarts to bring you here for your safety."

Realizing that maybe he had made a mistake, Lester turned around and for a moment he forgot his predicament at the sight of the dark and shadowy decrepit remains of a building up on the hill beyond the gates. "You brought me to a ruin for my safety?"

Severus realized then that he hadn't given him the medallion Filius had charmed for him. "Put this on."

Lester slipped the medallion around his neck. As he did so, the ruin changed to become a large and beautifully lit building. "Oh, my God! That's Hogwarts."

"I know that." Severus scowled and held out his hand, a look of distaste on his face. "And to get through the wards and inside of it, you'll need to be touching me."

Lester thought about who had been left behind. "But what about Virginia? You still haven't told me where she is."

"Let's just get inside," Severus said impatiently.

Now certain that this man wasn't going to hurt him, Lester stood his ground. "She's dead, isn't she?"

"Yes," Severus answered quite bluntly, just wanting to deliver this irritating Muggle and get back to his office. He reluctantly held out his hand. "And right now I need to get you inside."

"You mean that the same man who tried to kill me might come after me here?" Lester asked, as he just as unenthusiastically grasped Severus' hand.

"I doubt it." Severus dragged Lester inside, before something occurred to him. "Did you see his face?"

"No, he was wearing a white mask. It didn't come off when I tried to tug it away after I hit him over the head with a chair." Lester released

his hold on Severus' hand the moment they had cleared the gates and Severus told him they were through the wards. "Do you know who he was?"

"A Death Eater I presume," Severus said in an off-hand manner as he began to lead the way up the path. "This way."

"How did you know where I was?" Lester stumbled as he made his way up the steep path.

"Does it matter?" Severus didn't want to talk to Granger's father, who should have been dead, but thanks to someone screwing up, instead he was here and being escorted by Severus to safety. "I'm going to take you to a guest room and bring your daughter to you."

"Thank you." Lester kept up with the man with difficulty, and neither spoke again until they finally got inside the school. Once there, as Severus had promised, he was shown to a room and the door closed behind him.

Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire

Cordelia Finch-Fletchley looked wildly around her. The last thing she remembered was screaming as her husband had been tortured and then executed. Somehow she had gotten into the woods but couldn't recall how. Not knowing what else to do, Cordelia stumbled through the woods, keeping low to the ground and trying not to make too much noise; she had heard shouting a few minutes earlier and she was terrified that it had something to do with her but the sound had eventually faded away into the distance.

However, her journey was ended when, without warning, a hand clamped over her mouth and she was forced roughly to the ground. "Keep quiet and don't move," a voice hissed into her ear.

Cordelia tried to struggle despite the man's words, but it was like being held in an iron vice, and she went limp when the man again hissed another warning at her, telling her, "If you want to live, keep still."

The reason for the man's order became apparent when, moments later, more voices reached Cordelia's ears. Unlike before, this time she could hear what they were saying and it was obvious that the

owners of the voices were hunting for her. The voices grew louder and then dimmed, as they had earlier. Only when it was completely silent did the man haul Cordelia to her feet and, after taking her hand, he tugged her in the opposite direction to the way the hunters had gone.

With all of her attention being focused upon staying on her feet in the dark and debris strewn woods, Cordelia couldn't even protest at her rough handling or even ask what was going on. But what was more frightening than being tugged along in the dark by an unknown assailant, who she could only hope was there to help, were the shouts that sprang up from their left. Cordelia screamed as a green light narrowly missed her, blowing a massive hole in the tree just ahead of them.

Her scream died though as the man stopped abruptly, causing Cordelia to catapult into him and a second scream issued from her throat as she began to try and fight him when he wrapped both arms around her to hold her closely against his hard body. Then with a terrible squeezing sensation, they vanished.

Cordelia gasped as she found herself standing outside a set of gates that she could barely make out in the dark night. The identity of the man was revealed when a voice asked for identification.

The man lit up his wand. "It's Professor Lupin and one other, Cordelia Finch-Fletchley."

As they had with Severus and Virginia, the Aurors slipped back out of sight once Remus had given the password. Now certain that she wouldn't try to run, Remus finally let go of Cordelia and pointed behind him. "I need you to put this on and then to get you inside."

Only after doing what he had said with the medallion, did Cordelia look up and her mouth fell onto her chin. "That's Hogwarts, isn't it?"

Remus nodded. "It is."

Cordelia dragged her gaze away from the majestic candlelit building. "I take it the medallion does something to enable me to see it."

"That's correct." Remus glanced at the medallion that twinkled in the light of his wand. "It allows you to see Hogwarts and not a derelict building."

Cordelia was confused. "A derelict building?"

"It's what Muggles see to keep them away," Remus explained, before holding out his hand. "You need to take my hand to get you inside the wards."

"Wards are magical barriers, aren't they?" Cordelia recalled what Justin had told her as she slipped her hand into Remus' much larger one.

Remus pushed open the gates as he said, "Yes."

Cordelia gave a shiver as they moved inside the gates. "This seems so surreal."

"I thought the same thing when I first arrived here as a boy." Remus turned and started up the hill.

"I wish I had been magical," Cordelia said as she glanced up at Hogwarts again. "But sadly I've never done any magic in my life."

Remus gave Cordelia's hand a squeeze before letting it go. "At least your son is magical."

"I'm glad, although I wasn't so happy when I first discovered it," Cordelia told Remus, as she stumbled and had to stop walking.

Remus ignored Cordelia's comment and instead decided to see why Cordelia had come to a halt. "Is something wrong?"

"This hill is steep, you walk far more quickly than I do and I'm wearing heels." Cordelia looked down at her entirely unsuitable footwear.

"I should have thought of that." Remus aimed his lit wand at her shoes and transfigured them into Muggle trainers. "Is that better?"

"Much." Cordelia settled into a jog, and now it was Remus who had to lengthen his stride to keep up with her.

"You're quite fit," Remus remarked as they climbed the hill towards the school building.

"I like to exercise," Cordelia responded, not even vaguely out of breath as she navigated the steep hill by the light of Remus' wand. "You must too; you're not exactly unfit yourself."

"I suppose you might say that," Remus remarked as he reached the doors of the school to find Julianne Solace waiting. "Julianne, this is Cordelia Finch-Fletchley. Can you take her to my rooms? I need to get back out there to let the Aurors who were with me know that I have her and to try to find her husband."

"Wait!" Cordelia grabbed Remus' arm, not wanting Remus to embark on a wild goose chase. "Edmund is dead. Whoever attacked us, tortured and killed him."

Remus decided that finding the Aurors could wait for a moment. "How did you escape?"

"I don't know exactly." Cordelia still had no idea what had happened. "I remember Edmund being tortured and then, before I knew it I was in the woods but I don't remember how I got there."

Remus came up with the only logical solution he could. "I think you're in shock and it's affecting your memory. But Julianne will take good care of you."

"And now you know what the situation is, I think you should track down the Aurors and I'll take care of Mrs. Finch-Fletchley." Julianne put an arm around Cordelia as Remus did exactly as Julianne had suggested. "As Remus just said, I'm Julianne, Julianne Solace."

"You're the Auror Justin's mentioned who teaches Charms at the magical police place, aren't you?" Cordelia asked in surprise, suddenly recalling where she had heard the name before.

"Yes." Julianne led the way to the staircase and up the stairs.

Cordelia glanced around with interest as she walked up the stairs. "Is this the second floor?"

"Yes." Julianne guessed what was bothering Cordelia. "But you don't have to worry. The Basilisk that was in the Chamber is dead."

"Justin told me," Cordelia responded.

"This is us," Julianne said softly as she led the way up to the fourth floor, before she walked up the corridor and halted in front of a large oak door.

Cordelia found herself being led into a large sitting room. "You have a nice room."

"These are actually Remus' rooms." Julianne reminded her of what Remus had said, before she headed into the kitchenette. "I'll make you some tea and then fetch Justin. I thought you might like a few minutes to collect yourself before you see him."

Cordelia was glad that Julianne was being so understanding. "It's going to be a shock for him." Something else then occurred to her. "My staff – they're my friends and I didn't even think about them."

"As Remus said earlier, it's the shock," Julianne assured her as she put down the tea she was making and went back to sit down beside Cordelia, taking her hand. "And I'm sorry, but given what's happened to your husband, then they're probably also dead."

Cordelia finally started to cry. "Why? They would never hurt anyone."

Julianne drew Cordelia to her. "Death Eaters don't care about that."

"Death Eaters?" Cordelia tugged free, feeling a little suffocated. "I thought they wore white masks."

"Or silver," Julianne said, heading back towards the kitchen.

"The man who killed Edmund was wearing a gold mask," Cordelia told her, her voice shaking. "Sorry, I can't seem to stop trembling."

Julianne fished inside of her pocket and handed over a vial of purple potion. "This is calming potion. It will help you to relax."

Trusting Julianne, Cordelia grabbed the vial and downed the potion in one fluid motion. Within seconds, her trembling vanished and she felt extremely relaxed and able to think clearly. "This is amazing stuff."

"It is, but I wouldn't recommend taking too much of it. Crying helps in the grieving process, but at a time like this, I think you need to keep a level head." Julianne took back the empty vial. "And while the calming potion won't dull your senses totally, it will stop you from crying and panicking as you just did. Now I should get back to making you some tea."

Cordelia offered her services, the worst of her feelings masked by the potion, allowing her to function properly. "Please let me help you."

Julianne pointed out where the mugs were and she resumed making the tea. "So a Death Eater was wearing a gold mask?" When Cordelia confirmed what she had already said, Julianne grimaced. "That's new."

"Don't they normally have masks to delineate authority?" Cordelia had assumed that this was what the gold mask meant.

"There are a small group of Death Eaters who we believe are known as the Inner Circle who wear silver masks, as I just mentioned, but You-Know-Who always shunned such a thing." Julianne spoke to Cordelia as though knew what she going on about. "Sorry, you don't have any idea of what I'm talking about, do you?"

"Actually I do." Cordelia took a mug of tea from Julianne. "Justin has told me who Harry is and what happened to him as a baby, so I know who this Voldemort person is and that no-one calls him by his real name." She had noticed Julianne wince as she mentioned 'Voldemort'. "Sorry."

Julianne brushed off Cordelia's apology. "It's not your fault."

Cordelia headed back into the cozy sitting room. "So do you know who's behind the gold mask?"

Julianne shrugged. "Possibly. The man who attacked you is believed to be Sirius Black, or at least one of his associates."

Cordelia made a slight sound as she recognized the name. "But isn't Black a Muggle?"

"That's just what your police believe." Julianne could see that this time her explanation wasn't making any sense to Cordelia, and so she went on. "We have squibs who act as Muggle liaisons, and any Muggle reports that may be of import are passed on to our magical law enforcement, and then on to Amelia Bones, head of British Auror Division and vice versa. That's how the Muggle police know about Black and how we knew about you. Madam Bones was here on other business when the news came out about you and Remus was sent to collect you."

"But why him?" Cordelia asked, a little bewildered. "I know he's very capable, but he's just a teacher."

"He used to be a detective so he's very used to the Muggle world," Julianne explained, having no real idea of Remus' true standing, "As you heard though, Remus didn't go alone, taking Aurors, who are our police, with him since there wasn't time to try and locate Aurors who would be as au fait with the Muggle world as Remus."

"But he didn't have to go into the Muggle world at all." Cordelia started to make clear to Julianne what had happened. "As I said when I arrived, I somehow ended up in the woods, and he found me there. I still don't know how: It was pitch black out there and I was doing my best to stay hidden."

Julianne had no idea how Remus had done it, but she took a stab in the dark. "We have tracking spells."

"That's how those men must have found me," Cordelia mused. "But do you know why were we attacked?"

"Because your son is Harry's best friend and we think this was meant as a warning for him." Julianne waited for the woman to lash out but she didn't.

"Is Harry all right?" Cordelia asked, guessing that Harry was probably beating himself up over this, at least figuratively speaking.

"Not really. When I last checked, he was with your son." Julianne stood up. "And speaking of Justin, I think I should get him."

Cordelia stopped her, still having a few questions. "What about Luna and Hermione, the Weasleys and Justin's girlfriend, Bethany? Have their families been attacked as well?"

"Bethany's haven't, but they actually moved house yesterday apparently." Julianne sat back down, not sure how long this would take. "Unfortunately, Hermione has lost her mother in an attack on her dental surgery. And Luna almost lost her father when he was caught in his printing house when it was blown up. Luckily he had an emergency exit and escaped, and Hermione's father, who was also attacked, survived, and he's here with Hermione. One of the other professors collected him from the police station to which he had fled."

"The poor girls." Cordelia's heart went out to them. "How could one man do something so terrible? To attack so many people?"

Julianne decided that Cordelia may as well know everything. "That's not all he's done. Remus has lost his home, but thankfully no-one was killed." Amelia had only found this out after Remus and Severus had left. "And the Weasleys were also attacked but the damage was minor, and again no-one was hurt."

"Do you think your magical police will be able to find Black and make him pay for what's he done?" Cordelia slumped back onto the sofa as she asked.

"They haven't yet as he went to ground and we don't have any idea where he is." Julianne knew that this probably wasn't what Cordelia wanted to hear and so she tried to lighten things up. "And the only bright spot today - well, it's not really a bright spot, but I'm not really sure what else to call it – is a failed attack."

"Tell me about it," Cordelia urged, needing some good news.

"One of the Weasleys, Charlie, has sort of become a big brother to Harry, and as such an attack was made on the dragon reserve Charlie works at." Julianne wasn't surprised when Cordelia's eyes widened at the mention of dragons. "But in that place the Death Eaters bit off more than they could chew, quite literally actually."

Cordelia shuddered as she guessed at what Julianne was hinting at. "The dragons ate them?"

"Dragons are easily startled, and when the Death Eaters opened fire, several of them broke free from their cages and attacked the Death Eaters." Julianne explained what she had been told. "The keepers knew only too well to keep back, so there was little they could do."

"Why didn't the Death Eaters disapp..." here Cordelia hesitated, not remembering the correct term.

Julianne therefore finished the word off for her. "Disapparate. Two of them did but the other three lost their heads and the dragons didn't hesitate to make the most of it."

As Cordelia tried to take in everything Julianne had told her, she became aware that Remus had just walked in and she therefore stood up and held out her hand. "I didn't get a chance to thank you before you left, Professor."

"I'm just sorry I wasn't able to save your husband," Remus said, moving across the room and taking Cordelia's hand, but squeezing it in consolation, rather than shaking it.

"Thank you." Cordelia took back her hand and turned to Julianne. "As much as I'm dreading it, I think I should talk to my son now."

"Wait here and I'll fetch him," Julianne offered.

Remus could see that Cordelia had finished her mug of tea. "Would you like some more tea?"

"Please, Professor." Cordelia smiled despite the gravity of the situation. "That's just so British, isn't it - a cup of tea when things get tough."

"I find it works for me, and you should call me Remus," Remus told her, before he swiftly prepared a fresh pot. "I'll sort out a mug for Justin, although I doubt he's going to want one."

"Do you have any of that calming potion?" Cordelia asked hopefully. "It will help him deal with this a little better and give him more time for things to sink in. It's worked for me."

"I'll get some," Remus said and then turned to grab a vial. "Would you like another one?"

"No, thank you." Cordelia took the vial from Remus for her son. "Edmund's death is going to hit Justin far harder than it hit me." Cordelia didn't know why, but she was able to talk openly to Remus, even though she barely knew him. "I was more upset over losing my staff; they were my friends, and all they ever did was to be good to me – they didn't deserve this."

Remus didn't question Cordelia's seeming lack of feelings for husband, instead he commiserated with her. "Nobody did, but Black obviously doesn't care about you or anyone else." He turned at the sound of the door handle being turned. "I'll leave the tea here if you want it."

"Thank you, Remus." Cordelia smiled briefly at Remus before heading into the sitting room, Justin flying into her arms. "Justie, darling, I'm so sorry."

Justin lifted up his head. "Mum?"

"Take this," Cordelia offered the vial of calming potion.

Justin refused and in a trembling voice he asked what he already knew. "Father is dead, isn't he?"

"I'm afraid so." Cordelia hugged Justin tighter. "And as far as I know, so are Marissa and the others."

Not having spoken a word to his father since Edmund's demands about Luna, Justin felt terrible. But just like his mother, Justin was most hard hit by the news of the loss of Marissa, and it was only then that he broke down and started to weep. As he did so, Remus nodded towards the door, and he and Julianne left the pair alone to grieve together.

Next Chapter: Harry makes an offer and finally tells Hermione how he feels about her; Cornelius Fudge brings in more security at Hogwarts.

Chapter 41: Picking Up the Pieces

Amelia Bones entered Remus' rooms to find a bleary-eyed Harry drinking hot chocolate with Remus. "I'm sorry to interrupt."

Harry yawned. "I couldn't sleep anyway."

Remus spotted in Amelia's hand what Harry had missed – a bloody envelope with Harry's name on it. "That's not good news, is it?"

Amelia glanced down at her hand. "I doubt it, but we haven't opened it yet."

Harry finally noticed the envelope and that it had his name on it. "Where did you get that?"

"Edmund Finch-Fletchley's body was recovered outside the Ministry." Amelia refrained from mentioning in detail about the state it had been in. "And this envelope addressed to you was attached to the front of it."

Harry held out his hand. "May I?"

Amelia handed it over. "Before you read it, don't take whatever might be written inside personally."

"But it is personal," Harry observed, and he ripped open the envelope, withdrawing a piece of heavyweight parchment out of it, before reading it aloud.

'Potter,

Because of you I have spent more years than I care to remember suffering in Azkaban. I can only wonder how it feels to be on the receiving end of just a small taste of it.

Keep looking over your shoulder, Potter.

Sirius Black"

Harry handed the note back to Amelia. "He thinks it's my fault."

"He's just trying to upset you," Amelia said, pocketing the note.

"Well, he's succeeding," Harry said miserably. "I feel so bad about what's happened."

"Harry, please stop blaming yourself. No-one else does, especially not your friends." Remus then tried to comfort him by hugging him.

Harry briefly returned the embrace. "But I think it is my fault and this happened because my friends are exactly that, my friends. And because they know me, they've lost their parents and their homes: Luna's father is going to be in hospital for the foreseeable future; Hermione and her father can't return home because it might not be safe; and Justin's mum lost her husband and her staff, and they can't really return home either. Where are they going to go now?"

As he had been ordered to return to Hogwarts by Ignotus, Remus hadn't been involved in the logistical side of what would happen to those affected by the attacks. "I don't know, Harry."

"They will all have the Fidelius charm invoked on their homes," Amelia interjected. "This will make it safe for them to return home."

"But what about work?" Harry asked. "Hermione's parents were attacked in their surgery and you can't use the Fidelius on that." Not giving Amelia a chance to say anything, Harry went on. "And I'm not even sure that Justin and his mum will want to go back to their house." Only Hannah's and Bethany's families had not been targeted out of Harry's friends. In Bethany's case Harry guessed that it had been because she was a relatively new friend, and in Hannah's case, after their break-up, things had become awkward and Hannah had begun to gravitate towards others, effectively shedding the circle of friends she had had with Harry. Harry mulled over the situation as he took a sip of hot chocolate. "Could I offer to let them stay at one of my houses?"

The Weasleys had told Harry about everything he owned, Bill Weasley having taken him to Gringotts to collect his spending money and meet the goblin in charge of his accounts. Amelia thought this was a good idea but addressed her next question to Remus, well aware of how close he had been to the Potters. "Where do you think would be best?"

"Potter Place in Grimmauld Square," Remus immediately suggested. "As he already knows, Harry cannot take ownership of the main estate house until he turns seventeen, but Potter Place is not only big enough to house everyone, it also has wards dating back centuries, making it one of the safest place in the country. And if he wants to make the offer, as his alternate guardian I can to go to Gringotts Bank to set up the paperwork."

Without hesitation, Harry declared that he did want to make the offer. "I'd appreciate it." And while they were on the subject of houses, he brought up a point that was bothering him. "Where do you suppose Black is living now?"

"We don't know," Amelia had to admit. "But I do know where he's not."

Harry looked askance at her. "Where?"

"In common with you, Harry, and most members of the wizarding aristocracy, Black owns several properties, including the one in Grimmauld Place. But when Lestrange escaped – she's a member of the Black family - I took the precaution of warding all of them, meaning that neither she nor anyone else in the Black family could access any of them." Amelia had had to fight long and hard with Gringotts to be allowed to do so, the house forming part of the Black estate, which had fallen into their care upon Sirius' arrest. "I'm glad I did because the wards were tripped in September, but unfortunately no-one was found."

"But he has to be living somewhere." Harry suddenly felt angry again - he had run the gamut of emotions during the previous day and overnight, and anger seemed to be the predominant one. "And seeing as you knew about his houses, you must have had some idea that something like this might happen."

Amelia could see how annoyed Harry was and she was unsurprised that he was lashing out at her. "I did, and I have to be honest, I expected him to make some sort of move earlier than this but I didn't expect it to be against your friends."

Watching Harry slump in his chair, Remus decided that Harry had come to the end of his reserves and he pulled him to his feet.

"You're exhausted. Go lie down in my room. I'm going to walk Madam Bones out."

Harry did as Remus said, falling asleep within moments of his head touching the pillow. Only when he awoke did Remus pass on the news that Harry was to leave Hogwarts for a short time. "I've been to Gringotts and they've released Potter Place to me. Once you're packed, you'll be leaving to stay there for the next week. I'll be accompanying you."

Harry was surprised that he was being allowed to leave. "Why am I going?"

"Any student who loses a relative, even one like Marjorie Dursley, has to be allowed time away from school to grieve," Remus said, explaining the rules. "In your case, it will be more about supporting your friends than anything else."

"What about the next part of the Tournament?" Harry asked, suddenly remembering that it was scheduled for the next morning, although he had not yet been able to figure out what he had to do with the egg.

"It's been postponed until after Easter," Remus told him. "So you can simply concentrate on your friends and getting over this."

Potter Place – Four days later

Hermione and Justin followed their parents and Tonks as they navigated the Ministry of Magic corridors until they came to the testing room. "This way."

Lester Granger glanced at his daughter, who had looked excited as they had walked along, her head bobbing up and down as she had tried to take everything in. "Harry must have friends in high places."

Tonks turned back as she stood to one side to let the small group enter the room, and then she answered Lester's question for him. "You're right, he does. He's good friends with Madam Bones, head of Auror Division, and it was at her behest that you're being tested."

Lester felt totally out of place as he looked around the room, which in addition to numerous seats that stood in three rows, had two

stands at the front, one bearing a golden globe and the other a square box. "Is that what you test us on?"

Closing the door behind her, Tonks nodded. "Yes. Please go up to the front."

After imparting to both Cordelia and Lester what was going to happen, Tonks moved to the stand with the box on it, while Hermione and Justin took a seat in the front row. "Lester, if you would go first."

Lester nervously placed his hands on the globe and waited, noting that the scale in front of him read '6'. "I take it that means I'm definitely a Muggle."

"It does," Tonks confirmed, noting down Lester's score. "Cordelia, you're next."

Cordelia was also nervous as she mounted the scale. "So I just place my hands on this globe?"

"You do," Tonks said, as she reset the scale. "Okay, let's see what you've got."

Cordelia watched as the scale wavered between 12 and 13, before settling on 12. "What does it mean?"

"You're at the top level for a Muggle," Tonks said, also noting down Cordelia's score. "I thought for one moment you were going to hit 13, which would have meant that you were a squib."

"Why did it waver?" Cordelia asked as she stepped down.

Tonks tapped the sheets of parchment before answering. "I think you have a teeny bit of usable magic in you, and if the machine could have registered twelve and a half, I think it would have."

"So how does this affect us?" Lester asked, having taken a seat next to Hermione, who still look tired, which was unsurprising given that her mother's funeral had taken place less than two days earlier.

"Unfortunately for you, it doesn't affect you at all," Tonks said, taking a seat at the end of the row. "But Cordelia may well be able to use a

training wand, which is a wand that is more often than not used by small children to tap the square metal plates that operate things such as the shower and the stove."

This news excited Cordelia immensely. "I can get a real wand?"

"We need to visit Ollivanders to find out for certain," Tonks said, rising to her feet.

His mind elsewhere, Lester followed the group out.

When they arrived home, Cordelia was smiling widely as she entered the sitting room, and she seemed almost childlike as she spoke to Remus to tell him, "Remus, I've got a wand."

Justin, who looked much better than he had a few days ago, grinned and held out a box. "Isn't it cool? Mum can do magic."

"Not exactly. It's only a trainer wand," Cordelia pointed out, but she still took the box from Justin and took her ash and dragon heartstring wand out. As she waved it through the air, it was obvious to everyone there how excited Cordelia was, despite the wand's limitations. "I was surprised to find that they look just everyone else's wand."

"That's because squibs have no wish to stand out, even if they and their wands are only capable of doing the more mundane things." Tonks reminded her of what Ollivander had said, having accompanied the group home.

"I know, but it's good to know that I have enough power to do at least that," Cordelia said, placing the wand in the holster that she had also bought.

Justin again bubbled up. "Mum was a twelve, which is top of the scale for a Muggle, only one point below a squib, and that's why she can use the trainer wand."

"I was very lucky," Cordelia said, and, spotting the somewhat dismal look on Lester's face, she swiftly changing the subject.

With only one day left until the children were to return to school, Lester called Hermione up to the room he had been placed in. "Sit down."

Hermione had never seen her father look so nervous. "What's wrong, Daddy?"

"There's no easy way to say this," Lester sat down next to Hermione, "but I've decided to leave the country."

Hermione immediately brought up the proposal Harry had made after the funerals had been carried out. "But what about Harry's offer to stay here?"

"I'm a Muggle, Hermione," Lester said in a resigned voice. "I thought magic would be fun, but it's not, and everything's geared towards magical people like you and Harry, and I'm simply not comfortable in this house."

"But Cordelia isn't magical and she loves it," Hermione pointed out.

Lester had been surprised at how swiftly Justin's mother had taken to the house, whereas he simply found it stressful. "But she has a small amount of magic in her so that she can at least function without having to rely on others." He took his daughter's hand and gave her the bad news. "I'm sorry, Hermione, but I can't stay here. I've therefore put our house and my business up for sale. The agent thinks that they will sell quite quickly."

"Where are you going?" Hermione asked in shock.

"To Sydney to stay with Jessica," Lester said, bringing up the name of his sister. "She's going to help me find somewhere to live and then I can look for somewhere to start a practice."

Hermione struggled to hold back her tears. It had been hard enough losing her mother and now it looked as though she was going to lose her father as well. "But what about me?"

"I spoke to Tonks after we got back from the Ministry of Magic and she contacted Madam Bones. Madam Bones is going to arrange for our visa applications to be pushed through and she's also offered to make enquiries of the local magical school for you." Lester crossed

his fingers hoping that Hermione would jump at the chance of a fresh start.

She didn't. "I don't want to leave Hogwarts and my friends."

"It's because of Hogwarts and your friends that we're in this position at all," Lester observed.

Hermione challenged her father. "You talking about Harry, aren't you?"

"Yes." Lester was honest. "Hermione, I genuinely like Harry, but I believe you're in danger if you stay with him and your friends."

Hermione was well aware of that. "I know, Daddy, but I really care about Harry, and I'm not going to leave him or my friends or Hogwarts."

Lester had expected this. "Hermione, please reconsider."

"I can't, Daddy, I'm sorry," Hermione said, and then she pleaded with Lester to stay. "Daddy, please don't go."

"I'm sorry, Hermie," Lester said as he cupped her face. "But I can't stay here. I'm sorry to do this to you, but you have to choose: you can either choose me or choose to stay with your friends. You can't have both."

Harry reached out to steady Hermione as she ran full pelt into him. "What's wrong?"

Hermione couldn't get her words out for crying, and so Harry led her into his bedroom where Luna was lying on his bed reading. Alarmed, she dropped the book and scrambled off the bed. "What's up?"

"I don't know." Harry tugged an unprotesting Hermione onto his lap, Luna moving to sit beside him. "She's crying too hard to say anything."

After a short time, Hermione gained enough control over her emotions to tell Harry and Luna what her father had just told her – that he was selling up and moving to Australia. When she had finished, she buried her face in Harry's neck again, Luna rubbing her

back. Harry glanced at Luna, a lost look on his face. "I don't know what to suggest."

"You can't do anything," Hermione sniffled, responding to Harry's comment, and she revealed a little more about what she and her father had discussed. "Only I can, but no matter what I do I'm going to have to choose between you and Daddy."

This was not what Harry had expected to hear. "Choose between me and your dad? What do you mean?"

Hermione revealed what Lester had, before lifting her head up to look at Harry, her face wet from her tears. "Daddy won't stay and I don't want to go. I don't want to leave you."

Harry's heart jumped at the plaintive look Hermione was giving him. "I don't want you to leave me either." Harry took a deep breath and, almost afraid that he might lose the chance to do so if he didn't say it now, he told Hermione how he felt about her. "I know this probably isn't the best time to tell you this, but I really like you, Hermione."

Hermione ignored Luna's delighted sigh and told Harry that his opinion was wrong. "It's the perfect time to tell me, Harry. It makes me want to stay even more." Her face then fell again. "I just wish Daddy could understand that."

Harry could see Hermione's tears beginning afresh as he spoke. "Hermione, I think both you and your dad are upset right now and given time he might change his mind."

Luna had a different idea. "I don't know, Harry. It might not be that; perhaps he's being bugged by Wrackspurts."

Despite of her misery, Hermione gave a wet giggle. "I like Luna's idea better."

Harry let Hermione slip off his lap when she indicated she wanted to move, although she moved to sit next to Harry, slipping her hand into his.

"Do you think he'll change his mind?"

"He's usually pretty understanding." Hermione was by now calming down and starting to think a little more clearly. "When Mummy didn't want me to return to Hogwarts after the Basilisk incident, Daddy was the one who in the end supported my decision. But after what happened to them in the surgery, I think he's terrified something awful might happen again and that's why he's running away." Hermione released Harry's hand and got to her feet. "Perhaps I'd better go back and talk to him. Maybe he'll come round and change his mind about leaving."

"Why don't you give him some time?" Harry suggested. "Stay here with Luna and me. We're sort of looking at schoolwork. Well, it's not exactly schoolwork - Luna nicked some advanced books from my library."

Still afraid that her father would try and wear her down if she returned so soon, Hermione decided to go with Harry's suggestion and wait a little while; that and she couldn't resist the carrot Harry was dangling, and so she joined both him and Luna on the massive four poster bed, curling up against Harry's side with a book on defense that was far in advance of anything she should be learning. Soon though, her eyes began to droop, and she dropped the book.

Lester had been worried sick when he had been unable to find Hermione after their talk and, after searching the house, he had turned to Remus, who had been ordered to keep an eye on Harry, for help to find her, Cordelia, Tonks and Justin all having gone out. Lester's relief was tenfold when Remus opened Harry's door to find Hermione curled up to Harry's back and Harry curled up to Luna. But then anger at Harry and his being in bed with his daughter overrode everything and Lester tried to barge in.

However, Remus stopped him. "It's perfectly innocent. Luna is always in here and so is Hermione when she's not with you."

Lester didn't want to listen to Remus. "I want her out of that room."

"They're exhausted, Lester, and they need the sleep." Remus was well aware that none of the children were sleeping well at night, having heard them pacing up and down, and making frequent trips downstairs, and, in Luna's case, into Harry's room when she didn't want to wake Hermione up after her nightmares.

"But they're in bed together," Lester bristled. He liked Harry but he was far from happy at discovering her daughter curled up with a boy and another girl.

"They're surrounded by books, fully clothed and lying on top of the bed – they were obviously reading and fell asleep," Remus deduced quite correctly. "And I think you should leave them be. It's time they got some sleep." When Lester relented, Remus took him downstairs. "You seem pretty upset. Do you want to talk?"

Needing another adult to confide in, Lester told Remus what had happened. "I told Hermione about the move to Sydney and I also told her I'd prefer it if she came with me. She didn't like it and so she stormed off in tears. I have to be honest and admit that it hurts that my little girl picked her friends over her family."

"I understand that you must be hurting, Lester," Remus said softly, "and that you've been through a terrible time. But that's not what's at issue here, it's Hermione. She shouldn't be made to feel as if she has to choose because you want to start afresh. I wholly understand why you want to take her with you but I also believe that you won't be happy if Hermione is unhappy."

Lester was more than a little embarrassed at the tears that came to his eyes. "I just want to take her somewhere safe."

"I know but even there, you can't protect her all the time." Remus reached out and patted Lester's arm. "And while you know that you can force Hermione to go with you, to make her choose between you and her friends, it would be the wrong decision."

Deep down Lester knew that Remus was right, and he finally admitted as much. "After what happened to me, I needed to blame someone and that someone was the wrong person, which meant that I also didn't want to take Hermione's feelings into account as I knew what she would say. I hated it when Virginia did that and now I've done the same thing." Lester realized that he would need to talk more rationally with Hermione and so he asked Remus for a favor. "When Hermione wakes, will you ask her if she could come to my room?" When Remus agreed that he would, Lester stood up. "I think I need a little time to myself now. Please excuse me."

Remus politely stood up as Lester left the room. He had the feeling that when he spoke to Hermione again, he would be more amenable towards his daughter's feelings. A short time later, he heard the front door open to reveal Cordelia, Justin and Tonks, who had all been to the Ministry again, but for a different reason than before.

Tonks beamed at Remus as she entered the dining room. "We got we were after and I think we should all go out to dinner tonight to celebrate – everyone could do with a little cheering up."

"I doubt Hermione and Lester will be going," Remus said before filling the trio in on what had happened.

Cordelia felt sorry for Hermione. "I'm always willing to take care of her. I told Lester as much when he first told me about his plans a few days ago."

"I'm sure he'll be happy to take you up on your offer," Remus told her. "But I think we should wait until he's spoken with Hermione before offering again."

Cordelia agreed with Remus. "I agree."

Justin grabbed his mum's hand and tugged her towards the stairs. "Now let's go show Luna what you've got. I bet she'll be in Harry's room."

"She is, but let's all do it," Remus suggested, a slightly wicked smile playing across his lips.

So they all traipsed upstairs and into Harry's room. Justin's mouth fell open at the sight of his friend and Remus' mouth twitched in amusement. The little group had shifted since Remus and Lester had come into the room. Now Harry had his arm wrapped around Hermione's back and she had turned to face him, burying her face in his neck. Luna too was curled up tightly against Harry, her arm looping over him, leaving her hand resting lightly on Hermione's hip. Remus couldn't resist and he coughed quite loudly.

Neither Hermione nor Harry stirred, but Luna opened her eyes to find everyone looking at her. Nudging Harry, she sat up. "Harry, wake up."

Harry didn't open his eyes, he was too comfortable, and so he blearily asked, "What's up?"

"We're being watched." Luna showed no embarrassment, however, despite her words. "Hi, Professor."

"I keep telling you that you can call me Remus out of school," Remus said lightly.

It was hearing Remus' voice that aroused Harry out of his sleepy demeanor and he realized the position he was in. Sitting bolt upright, he began to make excuses. "Remus, this isn't how it looks."

Remus was unable to resist teasing Harry. "It looks to me as though you have two young women in your bed, young man."

Hermione had by now also woken up and she too began to excuse their behavior. "Harry's right, it isn't how it looks. I was just tired and..."

Remus began to laugh. "Calm down. I'm just teasing."

Justin also laughed. "I bet you were sweating it."

"Get lost," Harry barked at his friend, his face stained red. "We were just reading and fell asleep."

"I already know that," Remus revealed. "Lester and I came in and found you like this earlier."

Hermione's face paled. "Daddy is going to kill me."

Remus smiled at the girl. "Hermione, it's quite all right. Your father knows that this is entirely innocent. We had a chat and I believe that he's feeling a little more amenable towards hearing what you have to say about his move."

Hermione's face lit up. "Really?"

Remus passed on Lester's message. "Really. In fact, he said that he wanted to see you when you woke up. He's in his room." He smiled as Hermione shot out of the room. "And we have some other good news."

Justin jumped onto the bed, just as a child would, his excitement showing in his face. "Luna, you can stay here."

Luna blinked several times in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Let me explain," Cordelia said, as she sat down and took Luna's hand. "You know that your father always wanted you to live in a magical home with a magical family if anything happened to him?"

Xenophilius had slipped into a coma a few days after the accident, and Luna gave a sad sniffle as she thought about him. "Yes, that's why I'm supposed to go to Ireland and live with my cousins until Daddy gets better."

"You don't want that though, do you?" Cordelia softly asked.

"No." Luna wanted to stay with her friends.

"Well, I didn't want to say anything before now, just in case I couldn't make it happen." Cordelia held out her hand to Justin, who passed her the certificate he had grabbed on the way up the stairs. "But it turns out that even though I'm a Muggle, because Justin is magical, our family counts as magical, and so, if you want to, but only if you want to, I'm going to take you in until your father recovers. That's what this is – a magical order from the Children's Court in the Ministry of Magic."

"But you hardly know me," Luna breathed in disbelief as she shakily took the certificate from Cordelia to look at it. "And I made things awful when I came to stay with you."

Cordelia disagreed with the girl. "Edmund made things awful, Luna, not you. And even though I don't know you that well, I do care about what happens to you."

Justin seconded his mother. "And so do I, Luna."

"But..." Luna said in a voice that was full of tears.

Justin sat down on the bed. "I know what you're going to say, but don't. It didn't work out between us as a couple, but we're still friends and this will make you a sort of sister."

Luna smiled tremulously at Justin. "I think I'd like that." She then burst into tears and hurled herself into Justin's arms, the certificate being crushed between them. "I've been so scared."

"I know." Justin stroked her hair. "But it's going to be okay."

Luna now couldn't speak as she was crying as heavily as Hermione had been earlier. When she eventually stopped, she was hugged in turn by everyone in the room and then she was told that she had to sign the certificate to make it official. "How did you do this so quickly? I thought this sort of thing took ages."

"It helps to know the Head of the BritAD," Tonks said as she handed her a quill. "All you have to do is to sign there and you'll become a temporary part of Cordelia's family."

"I'd like that." Luna signed her name with a flourish and gave a scream of delight. "I don't have to move to Ireland!"

Cordelia glanced at Harry. "You do realize that your offer to let me stay here will have to continue until Luna's father recovers?"

"I don't care." Harry was almost bowled over by Luna in her excitement. "You can all stay as long as you need."

Cordelia brought up Tonks' earlier suggestion again. "Given that this is worth celebrating, as Tonks suggested earlier, I think we should go out to dinner. What does everyone think?"

The children were all fed up of feeling miserable and readily agreed.

What was even better was that, although Lester had declined to go out to dinner and Hermione had stayed with him, Hermione had good news for the group when they returned. She revealed that although she was to spend most of her summer holidays in Sydney, at least for this year anyway, she had agreed with her father that she should remain at Hogwarts and, during the shorter holidays, if Cordelia and Harry were amicable to the idea, she would stay with Cordelia at Potter Place. Both were, and it was a much happier Hermione who went to bed that night. And for the first time in a week, Harry found himself alone, as Luna slept nightmare free and didn't need to turn to him for comfort.

March 17th 1996

Remus laughed as he raced on his disguised Vengeance against Harry, with Harry using his old Nimbus, his own Vengeance being ridden as a Nimbus 2001 by Justin. "You'll never keep up."

"Cheater!" Harry laughed and he pulled a snitch out of his pocket. "I bet I can beat you to this though."

Justin swooped in under them. "I have a great idea. We'll keep releasing it until only one person remains. The loser buys Butterbeer for everyone when they finally let us go back into Hogsmeade."

"You're on," Remus agreed, although if he went he intended to buy something a little stronger than Butterbeer.

Harry let go of the snitch and it quickly disappeared. "I can almost taste that Butterbeer now."

Susan, who was now finally confident enough to fly alone, shook her head. "It's time someone took you down, Potter."

"Perhaps," Harry answered a little too self-assuredly. "But it isn't going to be you."

Luna giggled. "It's going to be me."

"Dream on, Luna 'I'm a pseudo Finch-Fletchley' Lovegood," Harry yelled out.

On the ground, Hermione sat next to George, a smile on her face at the delighted look Luna gave when Harry used her joke surname. "Why aren't you up there?"

"Because I stupidly said that Ron could use my broomstick and nothing on this planet will incite me to use a school broomstick," George responded.

Ron dove towards the stands, waving at Parvati, Lavender, who had reluctantly agreed to accompany her best friend, and Neville. George looked up as he heard a whirring noise go over his head. "I think the chase is on." He was right and Ron followed the sound.

The same noise alerted Harry and Remus that the snitch had reappeared, and with a grin, Remus overtook Ron to shoot off into the clouds. "You're so going to lose, Harry."

Harry, Justin and the others, all shot upwards on Remus' tail, but the snitch vanished as suddenly as it had reappeared. Soon though, Harry's hearing picked the whirring sound back up. Not seeing Remus in the clouds, he relied on his instincts and headed towards the noise. His fingers had barely closed around the snitch when a cold sensation made him tremble. It intensified and within moments, Harry was shivering uncontrollably on his broomstick. And just before blackness overcame him, Harry could have sworn he heard a woman pleading.

Remus luckily saw what was happening and cast the Patronus charm, driving off the Dementor that was attacking Harry. Justin managed to grab Harry before he could fall, but he was having trouble holding onto him as Harry was screaming and struggling.

"Ron, stun him."

Ron did as Justin told him and Harry went limp in Justin's arms. "What was that?"

"He was begging me to stop her crying," Justin revealed as he and Ron both wedged an unconscious Harry between them, so that they could get him and his broomstick safely down on the ground. "I don't know what he was going on about."

When Harry came to, Remus was holding him. "Harry, come on, wake up."

"I'm all right." Harry tried to get up but dizziness overcame him and he lay back down. "What happened?"

"You ran into a Dementor," Remus said. "Luckily the clouds parted and I spotted it."

"He was brilliant," Justin, who was also kneeling at Harry's side, informed Harry. "He made a shiny dog and it flew at it."

"It's called a Patronus and the dog is a Doberman," Remus said, providing Justin with the correct name for the shiny dog. "I'm just glad I'm capable of producing one. Not everyone can."

Hermione decided there and then she wanted to learn how to cast the spell. But she got no chance to ask Remus about it as Madam Pomfrey quickly joined them, George having grabbed Susan's broom to fly back to the school and alert them to what had happened.

Madam Pomfrey stood over Harry. "Harry, are you okay now?"

"I think so," Harry told her as Remus and Justin finally got him to his feet. "I fainted."

"He didn't just faint. He was attacked by a Dementor which caused him to pass out," Ron told her. "But even so, he was yelling and fighting about a woman crying."

"Dementors make you relive your worst nightmares," Remus said out loud, more for the other children's benefits, than for Poppy's. "Perhaps this happened to Harry. I think that maybe it made him remember the night his parents were attacked. Lily was found right by him."

Harry shivered. "I don't remember any of it but I do feel cold."

Remus pulled out some chocolate from his pocket. "I know you probably don't feel like eating right now, but it's what Madam Pomfrey will give you as an antidote if I don't."

His stomach churning, somewhat reluctantly, Harry took the chocolate and tentatively nibbled on it. As he did so, warmth began to spread through his chilled limbs and he began to eat the chocolate with a little more enthusiasm. "Why did it attack me?"

"I don't know." Remus was more than a little disturbed by what had happened and had every intention of filing a complaint at the Ministry on Harry's behalf. "It shouldn't have been inside the school grounds."

Harry glanced at Remus. "Can I defend against them? I don't want something like that happening again."

"I'll teach you, Harry," Remus offered. "But I don't know where I'm going to get a Dementor to practice on. It's far too dangerous."

"Can you teach it to me as well?" Hermione jumped in quickly with her question.

"I'm willing to help anyone who needs help." Remus didn't mind teaching more than just Harry. "But I still have the problem of not having a Dementor to practice on. It isn't necessary but I think it would make things move far more quickly."

This was something Poppy surprisingly could help with. "I may have a solution."

It turned out that Poppy's solution was a boggart that had made a supply cupboard in the hospital into its new home, which Remus hoped would turn into a Dementor for Harry.

Unfortunately it turned out that Harry's fear of the Dementor was still being overridden by his fear of his aunt, before Remus forced the boggart back into the chest he managed to get it into. "I'm sorry, Harry. I hoped you would be terrified of Dementors after what happened. But we'll make do without."

This cheered Harry up immensely and he began to practice in earnest. But despite his and Hermione's best efforts, neither of them were doing too well. Hermione was rather disappointed. "I know the wand movement and the incantation and I just know I can do it."

"Just as with the Animagus transformation, brains have nothing to do with being able to cast a Patronus," Remus informed her, knowing only too well why Hermione had expected to find this easy. "It's more to do with how you feel. You need to pull your Patronus from within you."

Hermione tried again and failed. "Why can't I do it?"

"You need to use the most powerfully happy memory you possess," Remus reminded her. "And then let that memory envelop you cast the spell."

Hermione thought hard. "But I've been using my happiest memory."

"I'm not going to ask what it is, as that would be too personal," Remus said. "But perhaps it isn't the right memory."

Harry had been using his memory of discovering that magic was real and he shared this, as it wasn't that personal. "The moment Dumbledore told me I could go to a magical school was the best moment in my life and so I'm using that memory."

"But perhaps it's tinged with a little sadness because of who told you," Remus suggested, as he tried to think of why Harry could be failing by using that memory. "Try something else."

As Harry continued to practice and fail, Hermione looked down at her meticulous notes. "Professor Lupin, you haven't told us why a Patronus is individual to each person."

"I don't honestly know," Remus said, watching Hermione write down his words. "But I think it's because it's somehow linked to a happy memory, and that shapes your Patronus." He gave a dry laugh. "But to be honest I have no idea why my Patronus is a Doberman, so maybe my theory is hokem."

Instead of returning to practice, Harry decided instead to ask some more questions. "But your Patronus isn't usually linked to your Animagus form, right?"

"Right," Remus confirmed. "Although I don't have an Animagus form, I do know that your father's Patronus was a large dog that looked a little like Sirius Black's Animagus form but that James' Animagus form was a stag."

Harry looked hopefully at Remus. "Do you think I'll be like Dad and become a stag?"

Remus shrugged. "I honestly have no idea. Your mother's Animagus form was a doe, so it's a possibility."

"Does it bother you that you don't have one?" Harry asked.

Remus answered truthfully. "A little. It would come in handy." He then turned the focus back on Harry. "So what do you want to be if you aren't a stag?"

"I know I don't want to be a dog like Black," Harry said, his face revealing his distaste.

Remus gave Harry a gentle smile. "Harry, even if you are, it doesn't mean that you'll be Dark like Sirius."

"Does the color of your Animagus form have anything to do with your allegiance, Dark or Light, or is it related to whether you are blonde or dark-haired?" Hermione asked, wanting to know more about Animagi – while she knew the basics, she was unfamiliar with the detail.

"Although the whole Black family is renowned for being a Dark family, the color of your Animagus form is dictated by your hair and skin coloring and not your allegiances," Remus told her.

Harry now wondered why his father had ever befriended Sirius, never having touched on the subject before. "If the Blacks are well-known for their allegiance, why did Dad make friends with him in the first place?"

"Even from quite an early age Sirius had always denounced his family's beliefs and being sorted into Gryffindor only reinforced he was supposedly telling the truth," Remus said with more than a trace of rancor in his voice.

"What about the rest of his family?" Harry asked, almost morbidly intrigued to learn more about the Black family, especially given what Sirius had done.

"Black had just one younger brother, Regulus, who was Slytherin through and through," Remus said. "From the moment he joined Hogwarts, Regulus was rather vocal about his beliefs that all Muggleborns should be banned from the school. But he became even more radical about them as he grew older. From what I've heard, Regulus likely became a Death Eater at sixteen, but he was probably entrenched in Riddle's plans long before then, just like his brother."

"Is he in Azkaban as well?" Harry asked, never having heard of Regulus before.

"No, he was killed a long time ago, three days after Sirius' father died after being caught up in a fight with Aurors. Sirius said he believed his brother had been killed by Voldemort," Remus answered.

"And Black still served Voldemort even after he killed his brother?" Harry asked, his voice full of incredulity.

"Like the rest of his family, Sirius would have put his loyalty to his master first," Remus responded. "No matter what it cost."

"And Black is still serving his master even now," Harry said with a trace of despondency in his voice.

A trace Remus felt. "And I'll do anything and everything I can to protect you all. As I've said before, I blame myself for not spotting Sirius' deception."

"It isn't your fault, Remus!" Harry repeated fervently. "No more than it's your fault that I'm supposed to be the one to kill Voldemort."

"I wish I could take that burden from you," Remus said sadly.

Harry gave a small smile. "So do I." He stood up. "I'm not going to be able to concentrate and so perhaps I should go and get washed up for lunch." He not only needed to do that, but he also wanted some time alone to think things over.

Hermione also left, as she correctly presumed that Remus would also no longer be in the mood to help her practice either the Animagus transformation or the Patronus charm.

Having joined Remus to practice again, given their discussion of a week previously, Harry was happy to discover his Animagus form, but he was more than a little dismayed to discover that his Animagus was going to be some sort of dog. Although as his form was still shadowy, they had no idea what sort of dog, although it was a big one. "Just great!"

Hermione scowled at Harry, disappointed that she was still failing. "At least you've discovered your form and you'll probably be the first to change."

Harry immediately countered Hermione's statement. "Just because I found my form doesn't mean I'll be first to succeed in changing, so you've still got a chance of beating me."

Remus agreed with Harry. "Harry's right and, given that you're I'll be spending a week with you over Easter, you can practice both of these things then if you haven't succeeded before we leave."

Despite Remus' help that day both children still failed to succeed in either endeavor, and when the train departed for the Easter holiday, they had still had not succeeded in their attempts.

Next Chapter: Harry is attacked during the second Task.

Chapter 42: Hot Under the Collar

5th April 1996

Harry came up for air, dropping his head onto Hermione's shoulder. "I thought we said on Wednesday that we were going to slow things down and put some space between us."

"Don't you like kissing me?" Hermione asked impishly, which was quite unlike her.

"You know I do," Harry retorted, finally looking up and noticing that Hermione's cheeks were a little flushed and that she was smiling. Guessing that distance was the last thing that Hermione really wanted between them, Harry decided to make the most of the time they had managed to sneak together. "Do you want me to prove it?"

Hermione's smile widened and she slid her hands under Harry's tee-shirt. "Only if you want to."

With Hermione rather boldly running her hands over his back, Harry most definitely wanted to. And so he quickly sought out Hermione's mouth again, while at the same time slipping his hand under Hermione's top to cup her naked breast, her bra long having been discarded.

With their kisses growing more intense, Harry's free hand travelled down to grasp Hermione's bottom over her skirt so that he could hold her more tightly against him. Feeling how excited Harry had grown, Hermione aided Harry in his efforts by wriggling and trying to get even closer to him.

Encouraged, Harry removed his hand from Hermione's bottom, and placed it on her thigh, letting it travel up her leg until he was once again cupping her bottom, but this time under her skirt.

This was the furthest they had gone so far, and as she kissed Harry, Hermione found herself wondering if he would actually dare to touch her bare skin this time. He did, although it was a slow and cautious process, as Harry slowly working his hand up over Hermione's underwear before slipping it down under the elastic. Hermione thought she was going to die at the sensation of Harry's slightly calloused fingers caressing the soft skin of her bottom, and she

whimpered and tried to press against him even more.

It was now Harry's turn to think he was going to die as Hermione's wriggling was pushing him closer to what had the potential to be an embarrassing disaster. Harry continued kissing Hermione for as long as he dared but soon it was a little too much and he pulled free, gasping for air. "I think we should get ready to go to out to dinner."

Hermione was immediately all concern. "What's wrong?"

"I just think things are going a little too fast," Harry said, unwilling to say that he had almost lost control of his body, even though he had used Justin's suggestion from the night of the Yule Ball of thinking about Voldemort exploding.

Hermione could see how red-faced Harry was, and given the way he had been pushing against her, she guessed at exactly what was wrong. But not wanting to make him feel any more uncomfortable than he already obviously was, she simply agreed with his sentiment. "Perhaps you're right. I'll go get dressed and meet you downstairs." She then vanished, and Harry hurried into his bathroom to take a very, very cold shower.

One week later

Harry stretched after finishing his exercises, and then centered himself as Remus had taught him to. Next to him, Hermione was doing the same. Suddenly Harry experienced a strange sensation, and he came back to himself to discover Remus looking pleased. "Do you know what happened?"

"Your head began to change shape," Remus said.

Hermione's eyes snapped open. "He's going to beat me at this, aren't you?"

Harry smiled at her, and leant across, brushing a quick kiss across her nose, enjoying the fact that he could show his affection in that way. "You're better than me at almost everything else."

Remus decided that now would be a good time to talk to both of them. "Before you both go back to your exercises, I need to talk to you about something."

Both children looked expectantly at Remus, and he knew their expectant looks would soon change. "I need to talk to you about your relationship and how far it's gotten."

"Why?" Harry asked bluntly.

"Cordelia told me that she caught Justin and Bethany in a compromising situation a few nights ago," Remus began. "Cordelia was going to talk to you to see how far things had gotten between the two of you, and I said I would do it instead."

Harry hurried to make it clear how things stood, suddenly uncomfortable that Remus might mention Harry's own compromising night when Remus had caught Harry with Hannah. "If it's about those spells you told me about, I have no intention of using any of them for a very long time."

Remus had to hide his smile at the worry he felt coming from Harry, and he suspected he knew why, although he had no intention of being so indelicate as to bring up Harry's ex-girlfriend. "I'm glad to hear it. Now keep practicing."

When Remus left the room, Hermione took Harry to task. "What spells are you talking about, Harry?"

Harry's tee-shirt collar suddenly felt as though it was choking him. "Um, spells for you know..."

Hermione had no idea what Harry was talking about or why he was pulling a strange facial expression. "No, I don't know."

Harry thought quickly of how to explain without coming out and blatantly saying 'sex', and not wanting the limelight on him, he came up with an explanation that he believed would divert Hermione. "Spells for what Bethany and Justin might have been doing in their room."

Now Hermione caught on, but her focus was still very much on Harry. "Oh, but why would Remus have told you..." She spluttered off before glaring. "He thinks we're having sex?"

"No! But he was the one who gave me 'the talk'." Harry wiggled his fingers as he said 'the talk'. "And he simply wants to make sure that I'm not using what he told me."

Hermione had had the same talk when she returned home from Hogwarts after her fourteenth birthday, minus the lesson about contraceptive spells. "That's okay then."

Harry now wanted to talk about something else, anything else in fact, and so he picked on a different subject. "Did I tell you that I still haven't figured out what the egg is for?"

Hermione's attention was successfully diverted, and she frowned in annoyance at her boyfriend. "Harry!"

"I know," Harry said. "I know."

Hermione ignored Harry's protests. "You've had months, Harry."

"And look at what that time has been like," Harry pointed out.

Hermione's face fell. "You're right, and I'm sorry."

Harry felt awful and leant forward and slowly kissed Hermione before saying, "No, I'm sorry. You've been through much worse."

"It feels better when I'm with you," Hermione said and she kissed Harry again.

All thought of anything flew out of Harry's head as they kissed, and when he it was over, he got to his feet. "I think we should go for a walk."

"Fetch your egg," Hermione demanded, aware of why Harry had decided to break things up. "We can try some spells on it in the conservatory."

After three hours, Harry was fed up. "I'm never going to work out what it does."

Even Hermione was frustrated and she bounced onto the wooden bench where the egg was balancing, sending it careening into the pond behind the bench. "Harry, I'm so sorry. I'll get it."

However the summoning spell Hermione used didn't work. "It must be caught on something."

Hermione watched as Harry climbed over the small wall and slipped into the waist high pond. "Be careful."

"Hermione, it's a little pond. Nothing's going to happen to me," Harry said and he ducked beneath the water, to come up again almost immediately. "Hermione, you're brilliant!"

Hermione looked at Harry in confusion. "What are you going on about?"

"The egg," Harry said. "It's opened up and I can hear it singing."

"Get it out then," Hermione told him.

However when Harry brought the egg to the surface, a horrible screeching noise came from it. "I thought you said it was singing."

"You must only be able to hear it underwater," Harry said, having shoved the open egg back under the water.

Hermione swung her legs over the wall and joined Harry in the water, before dipping beneath the surface and listening. She did it twice before she pieced together the words, and she summed it up for Harry. "Basically you've got to find something you'd miss most in the world if it was gone, so it's probably going to be something like your broomstick. It's going to be hidden beneath ripple and wave, so it's obviously going to be hidden beneath water, probably the lake. It also said something about the sands of time, so you're going to be doing this against the clock, and also not straying from the path, which could mean sticking to what belongs to you or not leaving a set route."

Harry grinned at his very wet girlfriend. "I thought I wasn't supposed to have help."

Hermione went very red. "I didn't even think."

"I can see that," Harry said, his grin widening.

"What's so funny?" Hermione asked.

Harry let his eyes travel down. "Guess."

Hermione's hands flew over her breasts as she realized that her white blouse and bra had become see-through. "Harry Potter, close your eyes."

Harry did nothing of the sort and pulled Hermione to him, kissing her. Then he wiped her hair out of her eyes. "I like looking at you, Hermione."

"You mean looking at my breasts," Hermione said a little indignantly.

"No, I meant at you," Harry said. "You are so pretty."

If it had been anyone but Harry, Hermione would have called them on their statement, but Hermione was well aware that buttering a girl up was not Harry's way. Turning the tables on him, she stared blatantly at his white see-through tee-shirt. "I like looking at you too."

Now Harry became flustered. "Um, why don't you apparate to your bedroom and I'll deal with this egg."

"In a minute," Hermione said, and she leant forward to kiss Harry again, losing herself in the kiss.

A polite cough interrupted them, and Harry wrapped his arms around Hermione to hold her against him, shielding her body from the sight of whoever had coughed. He wanted to groan as he watched Remus come in. "This isn't what it seems."

"I think I've heard that from you before," Remus said, his disapproval apparent.

Now more than a little worried that Remus was going to bring up Hannah, Harry kept Hermione with her back to Remus and released her. "Go and get changed."

Normally she would have stayed but given the state of her clothing, Hermione vanished, leaving Harry to face Remus alone. "We've been practicing spells on the egg, and we discovered it only works if you have it beneath the water. We both were in the water listening to it."

Remus folded his arms. "It didn't look as though you were listening when I walked in."

Harry had to admit Remus was right and he therefore told Remus what had happened. "We did kiss but honestly, Hermione was about to go back to her room to get changed - alone."

Remus discerned Harry was telling the truth. "Okay, but just be careful. I don't want to have to explain to Lester why the daughter he believes Cordelia is looking after is pregnant."

Harry went bright red. "I wasn't going to go that far."

Remus knew better. "Harry, all teenage boys want to go that far. Believe me when I say I've been there, so I know exactly what how far you want to go."

Well aware that Remus would know that he was lying if he did so, Harry was truthful. "Okay, I've thought about it, but I learnt my lesson after what happened with Hannah."

Once again, Remus was able to discern that Harry was being truthful, and so he let the subject drop. "Very well." He nodded at the egg that lay glistening in the water. "You've only just solved it?"

Harry was more than a little relieved for the change in subject, and he nodded his head vigorously. "Yeah."

"I'm not surprised," Remus said, not taking Harry to task over his delay. "You've had a lot on your plate. Now take the egg and go get dressed yourself. We're all going out to dinner as it's the last night before we return to school."

"I thought you had a date," Harry said, aware that Remus' date was supposed to have been a meeting with Altus.

"Alas my date stood me up," Remus said in a light voice, and he turned away. "So go get dressed."

Two Days later

Harry glanced around him as he sat down. "I haven't seen Hermione this morning."

"She's probably in the library," Susan suggested. "It's where she normally is before breakfast."

Harry had dropped by the library but hadn't spotted Hermione in there, but guessing that she had probably been in the back somewhere, he dismissed his slight worry. "I'll catch up with her after classes this morning."

But Harry still couldn't find Hermione at lunch. He also noticed that Luna and Remus weren't there as he made his way over to Filius, who was sitting at the teachers' table. "I'm sorry to interrupt your lunch, Sir, but could I have a word?"

Filius guessed almost immediately what was up with Harry. "Of course. Come with me."

Harry ignored the faintly disgusted look that Severus threw his way, and he followed Filius to the end of the table and into the anteroom off the Great Hall. He had barely taken a step inside when he blurted out, "Hermione's missing and so is Luna."

"They're perfectly safe, Harry," Filius assured him. "They're doing something for me at the moment, but they'll be returned to you before dinner." Filius then started to move back towards the door signifying that the very brief talk was over.

With the Headmaster leaving, Harry felt pressured to accept what he had been told without complaint, and so he left the room to return to his table where he filled his friends in on what Filius had said. They had just finished their lunches when Filius stood up and made an announcement about the second task being about to start.

Justin pulled Harry to one side. "I know you were asking the Headmaster about Hermione but did you ask about Luna as well?"

Harry nodded. "Apparently the girls are doing something for him."

Susan found this rather odd. "Even given that, I would have thought that Hermione would be back in time for the second task, particularly as she's going out with Harry now."

"Susan, she hasn't exactly been a big fan of the tournament from the start," Justin reminded his friend. "And I bet she'd rather be doing whatever it is that the Headmaster has assigned her; no doubt it's probably some sort of research, and I suppose Luna was thrilled to be asked to join in."

Although he still felt strangely uneasy, Harry decided that Justin was probably right. "I suppose we should go down to the lake then."

Justin noticed that the Great Hall was quickly starting to empty out. "Come on, we'd better go, otherwise you'll be late, Harry."

Harry followed his friends out of the Great Hall and headed down towards the stands that had been erected beside the lake the night before.

Seated next to Harry as he waited to be called, Justin could see how concerned Harry still was. "If the Headmaster said she's okay, then she's okay, Harry. And she has Luna with her."

"I just have a bad feeling about this," Harry said, unable to shake the feeling of doom that had settled over him.

He stopped speaking as Filius stood up and made an announcement. "Welcome to the second task. Our four Champions will assemble on the dock."

Justin left to join Susan and Bethany, as did Parvati, who watched with interest as the four Champions went into a tent set on the far side of the dock before coming out, shivering in their varied bathing suits. "I wouldn't want to be doing that."

Ron, who was sitting on Justin's other side, agreed with his girlfriend. "Me neither. I've got a coat on and I'm still frozen." At Ron's words, Parvati snuggled closer.

On the dock, Harry's attention, however, was drawn back to the Headmaster as he announced the task facing the Champions, and Harry stiffened, shaking his head in dismay, and talking to himself. "I have to find what I'd miss most and Hermione is missing? I thought it would just be a broomstick."

George glanced across at Harry. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine," Harry said, half afraid he was right about Hermione.

Aware of what Harry was assuming, George tried reassuring Harry. "You don't know that Hermione is what you'd miss most, Harry."

Harry didn't turn around as the Champions moved towards the edge of the dock. "So the fact that Hermione is supposedly doing something for the Headmaster is just a bit of a coincidence?"

George had the decency to blush. "Actually, Fred is also missing and has been since yesterday. Professor Lupin said he's okay. I was worried sick when he vanished."

Harry felt a sense of relief when George mentioned Remus, aware that he'd never let anything happen to Hermione. "I'd better concentrate on what I'm doing then."

The four Champions were all then told that they could enter the water in order, George first, then Harry, and then the final two contestants.

Up in the stands, Justin watched anxiously as time ticked by, and he was disappointed when Natasha Vladimir appeared first above the surface of the water together with a redheaded companion. He turned on Ron. "I thought you said Fred was what George would miss most."

Ron was more than confused. "But he's only been going out with Natasha for a couple of weeks. I didn't think she would choose him."

"Perhaps they had no choice in the matter," Susan sensibly suggested, Neville agreeing with his girlfriend.

Now it clicked with Justin why both Luna and Hermione were missing. "So Luna is the one that would George miss most?"

Bethany wondered if her boyfriend still had a thing for Luna. "It looks that way."

Justin immediately guessed what was up with Bethany. "I don't like her that way anymore, Beth. I like you."

Bethany leant into Justin's side, feeling relieved and happy. "I like you too."

A short time later, however, Parvati clapped as Harry appeared above the surface, Hermione in his arms. "It looks as though Harry has found what he'd miss most."

Justin stood up hurriedly as the couple suddenly vanished, and a long thirty seconds later, George surfaced but he was alone, and as he dove back under the water, next to him the competitor from Beauxbatons also surfaced along with the girl he had had to rescue. At that moment, Justin heard a bang and knew that the competition had now been declared over. Suddenly George reappeared once more, this time with Hermione in his arms. "Something isn't right." Justin began to run, his friends following, as he pushed past the other students in order to get down to the dock where Remus was about to get into a boat. "What's going on?"

"Not now," Remus snapped, and he climbed into the boat with Hagrid. Aiming his wand at the water, the boat shot off, and within moments, Remus had reached George and an unconscious Hermione and had pulled them in. "What's going on?"

George's teeth were chattering and Remus cast a warming spell on him. "Harry needs help. He and Hermione were being attacked, and he let go of her, so I brought her up. Luna's still down there."

At that moment, Harry bobbed into sight yet again before vanishing once more. Having gotten a bearing on Harry, Remus vanished most of his clothes and shoes and, using the same bubblehead spell that Harry had, dove into the water and out of sight. Having come to view the task as a judge, on the dockside, by now Amelia Bones had also realized that something must be terribly wrong, and so she immediately ordered the four Aurors with her to take the spare boats and get out there on the lake.

As Remus got deeper and deeper, he noticed Harry struggling against the grip of two white masked men. Despite George's warning, Remus had expected to see that Harry had been dragged back down into the water by merpeople or something similar and had not anticipated this. Suddenly Remus let out a scream as a spell hit him in the leg. Although he was quick on land, he, like anyone else, was hampered by moving in water, but he did have a trick up his sleeve, and he cast a speed spell on himself, which helped him to cut through the water quicker. After flipping upside down, he aimed a spell at one of the men holding Harry, who like Remus, was unable out of the way fast enough.

Spotting more men swimming towards Harry, Remus aimed his wand at him and summoned him, putting as much power into the spell as possible. "Accio Harry Potter."

Harry shot through the water, taking the Death Eater with him. Taken by surprise the Death Eater let go, and Harry continued forward, arching upwards as a spell hit him in the back.

Remus grabbed him and aimed his wand upwards. "Accelero Consurgo."

The two of them shot upwards towards the surface and Remus removed his bubblehead spell as he cradled Harry. He was relieved to see the Aurors in boats and he handed Harry over before he was hit again, this time in the back and it was the last thing he knew before he passed out.

On the dockside, as he watched the action, Justin grabbed George the moment the boy landed. "What's going on?"

George quickly answered. "Harry had just released Hermione when he was attacked. My breathing spell expired and I had to resurface. When I went back under the water, Harry had let Hermione go, so I grabbed her and brought her to the surface." He pointed to his bleeding leg. "I got hit by some sort of cutting spell."

"So if you weren't supposed to be rescuing Hermione, who were you supposed to be rescuing?" Justin asked.

"Luna," Hermione said weakly, before she turned around. "Look, there she is."

Justin could see his former girlfriend waving madly at him, and he sat down with relief. Although the court order had now lapsed, Luna's father back on his feet, he still considered the girl to be a sort of sister, and as he had told Bethany, he truly didn't like Luna romantically anymore.

Two Weeks Later

Remus was spitting mad. "You can't be fucking serious."

Filius ignored Remus' language. "Harry has to take part in the final task, Remus. He's magically bound."

"I understand that," Remus barked at the Headmaster. "But Harry almost died in the last task."

Molly agreed with Remus. "Remus is right. You can't expect Harry to take part, and I also don't want my son taking part either."

Filius looked across at the Weasley parents and Remus, all united in defending Harry and George. "There's nothing I can do. If they fail to take part, then the magical contract will kill them."

Arthur put forth a suggestion. "What about if they take part for just a short time and then withdraw?"

Amelia, who had agreed to sit on the meeting, shot down this suggestion. "It has to be a legitimate reason to withdraw."

"Almost dying is legitimate," Remus snapped.

"Not according to the Rules," Amelia said, having read over them herself.

Molly made another suggestion. "What about if someone went into the maze with them?"

"They could, but they wouldn't be allowed to interfere," Amelia said. "It would kill them and eliminate the contestant. You were lucky the end of the competition had been sounded in the last task when you went in after Harry."

Arthur brought up a good point. "But George interfered by rescuing Hermione instead of Luna."

"Luckily George didn't actually interfere until after the competition had ended," Amelia told him. "And unfortunately the Rules don't allow for contestants to withdraw, not even if they were nearly killed in a previous task."

Remus hit the wall. "This is fucking ridiculous."

"I was right when I said you had anger issues," Amelia said in a disapproving voice.

"Where Harry is concerned, you're damn right I do," Remus said, turning to glare the woman.

Dolores Umbridge, who was attending on behalf of Cornelius Fudge, interrupted. "Ahem."

Amelia loathed the woman, who as usual was dressed all in pink. "Yes, Dolores?"

"Perhaps someone could wait with the Cup, so that if there is any trouble, they could step in once it was over," she suggested.

"It might be too late then," Molly said in an irritated voice, finding Dolores rather repulsive.

Amelia gave a heavy sigh. "Look, we're just going to keep on going round in circles. The Rules clearly state that no help can be offered and no contestant can withdraw unless injured, so we're just going to have to take extra precautions. I'll bring in four teams of Aurors to surround the maze, but that's all we can do until the contest is over."

Remus sank into a chair next to Molly. "What do you think?"

"I don't want George being hurt but I don't want him dying because he didn't take part either," Molly said.

Arthur put his arm around his wife. "And the same goes for Harry."

Remus gave them a wry smile. "I always imagined I'd be spared this sort of worry without children."

Molly squeezed Remus' hand. "You love Harry as if he was your own, don't you?"

"Yes," Remus said in a worried voice. "Just like you do."

"I couldn't love him more if I'd given birth to him," Molly said, adoring the dark-haired boy, who as he had with Remus, had also found a permanent place in her heart. "Sometimes I wish I had and then we wouldn't be in this sort of mess."

Remus got up slowly, stretching out his back, which was still sore after having to regrow his backbone, which had been badly damaged by the Reducto spell that had hit him as he had hauled Harry out of the water. Only quick action by Julianne Solace in summoning him had saved his life and stopped him sinking beneath the surface again. "I'm going to check in on Harry, and then head back to my rooms."

Molly got up. "I'll walk back with you."

Arthur kissed his wife on the cheek. "I need to head back to work."

Molly slowly ambled along with Remus after they had checked in on Harry, who was still sleeping, the curse he had been hit with rendering him unconscious and destined to die a slow death. However, even with the countercurse, it would be still a few days before he awoke.

Once they reached his rooms, Remus stepped aside to allow Molly in, before setting up a privacy barrier. "I know I'm not allowed to interfere, but I'm going to follow Harry when he enters the maze. I'm going to keep an eye on Harry in my Unspeakable's capacity, and I'll ask for a colleague to keep an eye on George."

"I'd feel better if you did," Molly said, not offering up any argument. But worry did make her caution Remus. "However, under no circumstances are either of you to step in and do anything that might harm either you or the boys."

"But..." Remus began.

Molly put a hand on Remus' hand. "I know that you'd give up your life for Harry, but I also know he wouldn't want you dying unnecessarily and that's what would happen if you messed with a magical contract."

Remus gave an annoyed grunt. "I know but it's hard just to stand aside and let this happen. It makes me so angry."

Molly smiled at him. "We all saw that, and ever since I've known you, you've been a little hot under the collar whenever you've been faced with what you see as an injustice."

"And you don't see it that way?" Remus asked.

"I do, but after living the life I have, you eventually learn to calm down about things a lot than you once used to," Molly told him.

Remus grinned. "I bet you really had your hands full with all those boys growing up, didn't you?"

"That would be an understatement," Molly said, although she was smiling as she did so. "Remus, I should head home, but I'll be back to watch the final task."

Remus gave Molly a hug and let her out of his rooms, before settling down to the Rules to the Triwizard Tournament yet again.

Next Chapter: The Final Task

Chapter 43: The Final Task

June 30th 1996

Harry stood nervously and waited for the signal that would tell him it was his turn to enter the maze. George, and the contestants from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons, had already entered, and with a bang, it was now his turn. Harry slipped into the maze, his stomach churning. Remus had already warned him about no heroics and Harry had no intention of performing any. After what had happened in the second task, Harry just wanted it to be over. As he walked along, he couldn't help but smile as he remembered back to his first year and his desire to be invisible. That most definitely had not gone to plan. Then, as he rounded a corner in the maze he spotted what could only be described as a monstrous rat. It was at least ten feet tall, had incisors longer than Harry's arms, and had the most piercing and unnerving stare Harry had ever come across. Faced with such a behemoth Harry had to tell himself to calm down.

"Okay, Harry, don't panic. Don't panic. Think! What would Remus do?"

Telling himself not to panic and to think about a solution was one thing, but putting it into operation was another, and Harry's stomach churning of earlier returned, and for a moment he again found himself back in the shoes of his first year self as he fought against the temptation to close his eyes, curl up in a ball and begin singing.

But he did none of those, instead he thanked Merlin that Remus had been teaching him some advanced spells and Harry cast a spell that he knew would not only blind the rat, but would also dull the remainder of its senses. Harry then took the precaution of using a sticking spell, swiftly followed by a freezing spell to stop the rat from following him. His heart beating faster than he could have thought possible, he slid past the rat, praying it wouldn't break free of the spells. Only once he had slipped around the corner did his heartbeat begin to slow.

"One down and Merlin knows how many to go."

Suddenly Harry heard a yell and as he turned, from about twenty feet or so to his left, a shower of red sparks flew up into the sky at the same time a string of incomprehensible words rent the air. Harry

had the feeling that the contestant from Beauxbatons had just been taken out of the equation. He himself then jumped and let out a strangled yell of his own as a warm body ran straight into him. He almost collapsed with relief when he realized it was Natasha, who had also screamed.

"Natasha, I'm so sorry."

"As I am," Natasha said, giving Harry as big of a relieved smile as he was giving her. "I thought you might have been vampire."

"Vampire?" Harry asked, paling a little.

"Yes," Natasha nodded. "Vich vay are you going?"

Harry pointed to the left. "That way."

"I go this vay then," Natasha said, and she went in the opposite direction to Harry at the crossroads at which they were standing.

Harry had barely taken two steps when he was suddenly surrounded by blackness and he felt as though he could no longer breathe. Quickly, before his oxygen ran out, he cast a bubblehead charm, but he was still blind. Using an overpowered lighting spell did nothing, the light barely seeming to cut through the inky blackness and so Harry started going backwards, but wherever he stepped, the darkness seemed to follow. He tried spell after spell but none seemed to work, and Harry eventually sank down onto the ground to give his shaky legs a rest and to try to center himself as he thought about what else he could try.

As he pondered what he thought each of his friends would do, an idea came to him: Luna's fairy spell. She had once used it when it was dark and the sparkling fairies had lit up the garden as though they were a bright torch. Harry got to his feet and aimed his wand into the air.

"Fata Advertus."

All at once the cloying darkness was lit with the sparkling fairies and Harry discovered he could finally see. He hoped, however, that Luna was right and that the fairies were sentient. Although he felt stupid doing so, Harry spoke to them.

"I can't find my way out. Please would you show me the way?"

Harry watched in amazement as the little fairies joined hands, and soon a chain stretched out, disappearing into the darkness. Harry was then surrounded by those fairies that had not joined the chain and they gently forced him forwards, then backwards, then sideways, and then what felt like in a circle, before all of a sudden he was free of the darkness and standing in the evening gloom. When he looked back, the darkness had vanished and he could see the point from which he had started after leaving Natasha, and it was less than six feet away from where he was currently standing.

He smiled at the fairies that still remained by him and offered up his gratitude. "Thank you so much."

After what sounded like a small sigh, as if a light switch had been flicked off, the fairies all vanished at the same time.

Harry wondered how Natasha and George were faring as he walked on, but his thoughts about them were put on hold as he came across his next obstacle, something Harry immediately recognized as a sphinx, which rose up and began to ask him a riddle, its voice low and growly.

"The man who invented it didn't want it. The man who bought it doesn't need it. The man who needs it doesn't know it. What is it?"

Harry stood thinking for what seemed like a long time, before he carefully responded, "A grave?"

The sphinx shot forward and Harry realized he must have responded incorrectly and wished he had gone with his other choice of a coffin. "Shit!"

Rather than sending up red sparks, he quickly cast invisibility and silencing spells on himself. It worked, and the sphinx subsided, but rather than sinking back down to the ground, it began pacing back and forth, blocking Harry's way forward. So Harry tried the same spells he had used on the rat, only for them to fail, the sphinx neither frozen nor apparently lacking its faculties.

Harry was well aware that he couldn't go backwards: down that way lay the darkness and he had no wish to spend time in that again. He therefore knew he had to go forward and, left with no other choice than to move on, he knelt down and closed his eyes, forcing himself to ignore what was just in front of him.

Moments later, he felt a ripple go through his head, then move down his torso and affect his arms. This was as far as Harry had gotten in the Animagus transformation before and he just hoped that he could now complete it. He relaxed more, and then he felt the ripple down his legs and all the way down to his toes. Although he couldn't see what he had turned into, Harry knew that he had done it, and he paced up and down for a few moments to get used to the feeling, before backing up as far as he dared.

The sphinx was still looking for Harry, who was still invisible and silent. However, having cast the silencing spell on himself and not the ground, Harry's endeavor to run began to dislodge tiny gravel stones that lined the path, giving him away as a tiny scrabbling noise reached the sphinx's ears as he got closer.

As the scrabbling stopped, the sphinx knew that somehow Harry was overhead, and leaping up, she swiped out with her claws. A spray of blood told that she had hit home and she easily spotted blood spattering the ground and then a trail moving away. Unwilling to give up on her prey, she followed the trail, bounding after whatever she had injured. As she rounded a corner, she discovered that the trail had somehow stopped. Her prey seemingly lost to her, she stood listening for a long moment, before returning the way she had come.

Lying on his back, Harry was in terrible pain, but rolling over, he padded away until he thought he was safely away from the sphinx. Sitting down, he closed his eyes in preparation for his change. The claw had sliced deep, and he had to force himself to relax and, for the first time ever, to reverse a total Animagus transformation. Harry let out a hiss and tears came to his eyes as his body changed. He then removed the spells he had placed on himself. Finally, with a shaking hand, he aimed his wand upwards, only to stop.

"I've come this far, I can't go back."

He had no idea as he said it, that less than ten feet in front of him, Remus stood watching him, Harry's words making him want to yell out in frustration.

As he had told Molly he would, Remus and his partner, Altus, had entered the maze almost an hour before the contestants, invoking invisibility spells of their own so that they could follow George and Harry around the maze.

Following Harry, Remus had half expected him to give up when confronted by the confusion spell that had been mixed in with an oxygen depletion spell and the darkness, but instead Remus had had to stand silently and wait as inside the darkness, Harry had struggled on until he had found a solution. Remus had not been surprised and had been both relieved and pleased for Harry when Harry had persevered and overcome the problem.

Remus had, however, found himself wishing Harry had given up when the sphinx had lunged at Harry when he had gotten the riddle wrong. Harry had then vanished and Remus had wondered what he was doing. His anxiety had turned to fear when he had seen blood appear as the sphinx had leapt into the air, obviously slicing into an invisible Harry. Remus' emotions had continued on their rollercoaster ride as he had felt relief when Harry had reappeared, injured but alive. His relief had turned to frustration as Harry had aimed his wand upwards to signal for help, but had changed his mind.

Having no idea that help was just a few feet away if he needed it, Harry looked down at his stomach, which was an absolute bloody mess, and he used the temporary field dressing spell that Remus had taught him, hissing yet again as relief flooded through him.

Moving on, his legs shaking beneath him as he did so, Harry stopped less than five feet later as the ground seemed to quiver under his foot. Harry knelt down and tentatively touched the ground with his finger, whipping it back when it was sucked downwards.

"Quicksand!"

Harry had no idea how far the quicksand extended and he also had absolutely no idea how to solidify the ground again. He could therefore think of only one way to get over it. Once again sitting

down and centering himself, he let out a pained yelp as his body transformed back into his Animagus form, ripping open the wound he had just covered.

Backing up, Harry began to run and then he launched himself over the quicksand. His terrified yelp echoed throughout the maze as he realized he hadn't made it and his hind legs began to sink, his front paws scrabbling for purchase as he tried to get out. Aware that he couldn't cast a spell to get help while in his Animagus form nor could he relax enough to change back, Harry was hit with the thought that he was going to die in the quicksand if he didn't do something to get out.

Now able to see his large paws, Harry guessed he had to be a very muscular dog and instead of kicking out instinctively with his back legs, he relaxed them, using only his front paws to dig into the ground and pull himself out, his aim a bramble, which had grown down from the maze wall and was lying less than six inches in front of his mouth. Even though he knew it would hurt, he needed to somehow get hold of it.

About to intervene, Remus hesitated as, with his heart in his mouth, he noticed that Harry was struggling forward centimeter by centimeter as he fought against the sucking power of the quicksand. He winced as Harry finally got his mouth around the bramble, using it to pull himself up, and Remus' legs almost buckled with relief as, with a hungry sucking noise, the quicksand released its victim and Harry tiredly collapsed onto the solid ground. When, after a few minutes, Harry didn't change back, Remus suspected that he couldn't, and able to use his lupine abilities to easily leap over the quicksand, Remus followed Harry as he padded along the maze, thankful that the end was near.

Panting with the combined pain radiating from his ripped tongue and mouth and his clawed stomach, Harry finally set eyes on the prize that the competition had been about. On the floor just in front of the stand lay George and a cloaked Unspeakable and, worried and confused, Harry bounded up to them. Unable to change, he couldn't send up sparks for help and he didn't know what else he could do but to try and reach the Triwizard Cup and end the contest in the hope that someone would come for them.

However, the Cup was on a stand that was at least ten feet high, and Harry wasn't sure if he could leap up such a distance, but he had to try. Crouching down, Harry leapt up, hitting his jaw on the base of the stand and making him yelp out loud in pain again. Deciding that a running jump might be a better idea, he backed up for one last attempt and then ran as hard as he could at the stand. It worked, and his jaws clamped around the handle of the Cup, before a tugging in his stomach told him that it was a portkey and the maze vanished from sight.

The moment Harry vanished with Cup, since the Competition was now officially over, Remus dropped his invisibility spell, checked George and Altus over and then aimed his wand at the maze. Then, as the maze began to shrink into the ground, he began running back towards the stands, leaping over the still shrinking foliage. He could see people running towards him, and the moment he was met by Hagrid, he quickly told him what had happened. "There are injured inside. Harry Potter took the Cup and vanished. I have to go."

Remus dashed off, although he honestly had no idea where Harry had gone to, but aware that he had the portkey ring, he decided to head home and alert Macclesby, before he then headed for the Ministry.

Harry, meanwhile, felt sick as the portkey whisked him away and, as usual, even though he was a dog, his landing was far from graceful, being thrown a good six feet away from the Cup and landing behind a gravestone. As he became aware of his surroundings, Harry's stomach lurched over: Just in front of him, less than twenty feet away, stood ten men, all cloaked in black, eight of whom had white masks, one had a silver one and the last one wore a mask of gold. Harry listened as the man in gold walked over in the direction of the Cup that was glistening in the moonlight.

"Where is he?"

Unable to spot Harry, the man lit up the area with his wand, sweeping it in a circular motion.

Now glad that he had been thrown away from the Cup, Harry slowly began to back away in the darkness, making sure that he kept in front of the spell. He was relieved when the man began to sweep the spell in the other direction before eventually dropping it.

The man then aimed his wand in the opposite direction to where Harry now was and yelled out, "Accio Harry Potter."

Feeling a slight pull from the spell even at that distance, as a precautionary measure, Harry grabbed hold of a root with his teeth and held on, even though the pain from his encounter with the bramble made it horribly painful.

Completely unaware that Harry was watching, the man repeated the spell several times, never once aiming his wand directly at Harry, before snapping out, "He must be here somewhere. Search the grounds."

The man in the silver mask remained at the gold masked man's side, and Harry wondered if the man behind the gold mask was Voldemort. He certainly couldn't think who else it could be, except maybe Sirius Black.

The overgrown grass in the churchyard provided Harry with plenty of cover as he slunk through it trying to avoid the men he knew had to be Death Eaters. Backing up, he could feel a strange tingling and he suspected that these had to be wards. Making sure he kept away from them, he skirted around the graveyard until his luck suddenly ran out. There, less than two feet away from him stood a Death Eater with his wand drawn, and it was obvious from how still the man had gone that he had seen Harry. Harry was terrified the man would call out to alert others or send a spell at him, and almost acting by instinct, he leapt forward, his powerful jaw clamping down on the man's throat before a sound could get out, except for a muffled gurgle.

Harry and the man crumpled to the ground and, as Harry stood over him, blood dripping down his maw, he stared down in horror, aware that he had likely killed the man. Afraid someone would find his victim, Harry bit into the man's cloak and dragged him into the middle of a mass of thorny bushes that were close by. Then on shaking legs, he headed back towards the main part of the graveyard. As he did so, another silver masked man appeared and he bowed low.

"My Lord." He was obviously surprised to discover that people were searching the graveyard. "Where's Potter?"

"We can't find him," the gold masked man said. "Did he take the Cup?"

"Yes," the newcomer responded, and he looked around. "He should be easy to spot; he's wearing a bright yellow and blue striped top."

The gold masked man aimed his wand in the air and cast a more powerful illumination spell than the one he had used earlier, the area lighting up so that it seemed like day. It was a spell Harry had never heard before and he wished he had known it when he had been stuck in the darkness. Keeping low to the ground, he listened carefully as the man incanted another spell and little wisps of yellow smoke rose up from the ground.

The gold masked man then touched his throat and cast another spell, this time one to raise the volume of his voice. "Split up and work inwards and check out every yellow smoke column. If he's here, he'll be drawn towards the nearest column. And yes, Potter, I know you can hear me and I will find you."

Harry guessed that the spell was somehow linked to his yellow and blue top, which in his canine form had transformed, rendering the spell ineffective. Shivering, Harry managed to avoid the Death Eater who came his way by backing into the middle of the same thorny bushes in which he had deposited his victim.

Having the body less than a few inches away, Harry tried to concentrate on something else and his mind wandered back in time as, for the second time that day, Harry was yet again reminded of his first year, this time of the occasion when he had hidden from Quirrell in the Forbidden Forest. This time though, he wasn't detected, and, even though his thick canine hair had protected him to some degree, Harry was still glad when he was able to slide out of the bush as the searching men reassembled at the starting point.

Harry then watched in dismay as the gold masked man turned his wand on the newcomer and yelled out, "Crucio."

Although Remus had described the pain spell, this was the first time Harry had ever seen it used on anyone, and the man's screams were some of the most horrendous he had ever heard, even worse than those that Pansy Parkinson had made when she had been

attacked on the Hogwarts Express. When Harry thought he couldn't bear it any longer, and he was sure he didn't know how the man had, the gold masked man, who by now Harry was certain was Voldemort and not Sirius, dropped the spell and addressed the prone man.

"Fail me again and next time you will die. You may all leave."

One by one the Death Eaters then popped out of existence until just Harry and the prone man remained. Harry was surprised that no-one had noticed that one of the Death Eaters was missing, but he was also rather glad about it. Suddenly the prone man groaned and sat up. As Harry watched in the dim moonlight, the man pulled out a vial and drank it, before repeating his actions. After a few minutes, he too vanished.

Only now did Harry dare to relax, letting out a long sigh and letting his head droop onto his paws.

As sunlight flooded his vision, Harry blinked several times and went to roll over, only to give a whimper of pain as the stripes across his stomach tugged painfully. Suddenly it flooded back to him why he was in canine form and lying in a churchyard in the early light of morning: he had fallen asleep from exhaustion after the Triwizard Tournament. Stretching slowly and carefully, he padded around the churchyard, looking for the Triwizard Cup as he hoped that it might be a two-way portkey. However, after searching for it in the area he knew it had landed, he found nothing. Having not seen any of the Death Eaters with it in their hands when they had left the previous night, Harry realized that someone must have returned to collect it after he had fallen asleep, and he was thankful that he had chosen a deep hollow surrounded by grass in which to fall asleep.

Sinking to the ground again, he tried changing back but the pain from his stomach was interfering with his concentration and in the end Harry gave up trying. Heading to where he had encountered the wards, Harry yelped as he tried to walk through them and, just as he had with his transformation, he failed.

The Burrow

Molly sat weeping into her handkerchief. "I can't believe he's dead."

Remus glanced at the clock on which Harry's hand was set at 'dead' and he sank down next to Molly. "I thought I'd find him or that he'd get out from wherever he was."

Across the room, Ginny was crying in Charlie's arms, all of Molly's children except for Bill, who was out on assignment, and Percy, who still loathed Harry, having returned home. "I was so horrible to him and now he'll never be able to forgive me."

Charlie, whose eyes were red-rimmed but not wet, knew how much it had meant to his younger sister that Harry might one day forgive her. "Shh."

Suddenly Ron gave a yell and pointed to the clock. "Look!"

Everybody's heads turned and Remus shot to his feet, his voice soft and unbelieving as Harry's hand moved to 'lost'. "He's alive."

"Then why did the clock show that he was dead?" Ginny said, scrambling off Charlie's lap, her tears still flowing.

Remus had a theory. "He must have been behind some formidable wards, wards somehow strong enough to hide Harry's life signs, and they've either collapsed or Harry has got through them. I'm going home."

However, when Remus arrived home, he could find no sign of Harry and, after telling Macclesby to alert him if Harry turned up, Remus apparated to Hogwarts' boundaries. Again he found no sign of Harry.

Little Hangleton

Having failed to get through the wards, Harry began to pad around the wall-bound graveyard trying to find another way out. He found none, but he did come across a huge tree that must have fallen during a storm or from rot eroding its foundations. The tree had massive roots and a small hollow at the base, and Harry found himself hoping that if he dug under it, he might not only avoid the wards but also the large wall as well. It was painful and long going, but Harry eventually succeeded, unaware that at the moment he had emerged, dirty and bloody on the other side of the wall and wards, Ron had been looking at the Weasley family clock.

Shaking himself to try and get rid of most of the dirt, Harry padded along the road that ran alongside the graveyard, before entering a mostly deserted village. As he passed a signpost, he noticed that the village was called 'Little Hangleton' and he wondered where in Britain it was. Having little choice but to plod on, he kept going, suddenly noticing that he was dripping blood again as he did so. His journey was to come to an abrupt end a few minutes later as a woman rounded the corner and stood stock still. Harry guessed he must look a mess and, given his size, probably more than a little frightening. Not wishing to startle the woman, he stopped walking and sat down. He then whimpered pitifully and lay down.

The woman backed off, hurrying into the red telephone box that stood a few feet from her. Harry could hear her making a phone call and he ascertained that she had called a vet. He was proved correct when, five minutes later, a vet's van came trundling around the corner and a tall blonde-haired man got out. He thanked the woman before he approached Harry very slowly.

"Hello, there, boy."

Harry got up onto his back legs and again whimpered, hoping that the man realized that he wouldn't hurt him.

The man moved a little closer. "I'm your friend and I just want to help you."

Harry knew that an injured animal might well have responded to the gentle, coaxing tone that the man was using, but he at least could understand human speech and so he held out a paw in greeting and whimpered once more, the pain in his stomach getting close to unbearable.

The man closed the distance and held out his hand slowly so that Harry could sniff it. Feeling totally ridiculous, Harry did just that, before taking a deep breath and swiping his tongue over the man's hand.

Only then did the man stroke Harry's head. "I'm going to fix you up."

Harry forced himself to keep still as the man produced an adjustable collar and slipped it carefully around Harry's neck, talking softly to Harry as he did so. Harry hated it when the man clipped on a leash

and slowly led Harry to the van, before opening the back up and placing Harry in a cage inside. Harry wondered if this was how Remus felt on the night of the full moon: trapped, in pain and not a little scared.

A short journey later, Harry was trying hard not to growl in pain as the man cleaned up his wounds. He couldn't, however, stop the growl that came from his throat as the man produced a needle. Harry had always hated injections, and he did his best to keep still as the man fixed up a drip in Harry's front left leg and, slowly, Harry began to feel sleepy, only half listening as the man stroked his head and spoke to him.

"It's going to stop hurting soon. You're doing well, boy."

When he came to again, Harry was in another cage, lying on a soft blanket and there was a small bowl of water in front of him. Both hungry and thirsty, Harry moved carefully towards the water, testing his injuries and discovering that, although he was still sore, he wasn't in as much pain. He didn't dare attempt to transform as there was someone in the room with him, and he also didn't want to rip open the stitches he suspected had been inserted in his stomach to close up his wounds. So instead he dipped his head and lapped thirstily at the water.

Harry spent the rest of the day half dozing, until a leash and collar was slipped around his head and he was taken outside. He was more than a little mortified when he realized that he was expected to answer the call of nature, but as his bladder was bursting, he had little choice but to do his business. If he had been human, he knew his cheeks would have been burning with embarrassment. On shaky legs he was taken back inside and placed back in his cage, the girl who had tended to him, being gentle and speaking kindly to him, telling him she was going to fetch him some dinner. Harry's stomach grumbled, but when dinner arrived, nothing would incite him to eat the dog food that was placed in front of him.

This continued for two days; Harry drank water and did his business as a dog, but he refused the dog food. He knew he had the vet worried but he couldn't do it. He was therefore filled with relief when he spotted a familiar face coming through the door and he barked happily, his tail wagging from side to side. Remus knelt down and

reaching inside the cage cupped Harry's doggie face. "You have no idea how happy I am to see you, Harry."

Harry barked, trying to convey he felt the same way. He then watched as Remus paid whatever bills Harry had incurred, before he clipped the hated leash on again and led Harry out. As soon as they rounded the corner, Remus knelt down, wrapped his arms around Harry and they vanished.

The Ministry of Magic

Harry had said little about his experience as he had been checked over by a healer and his Muggle stitches vanished. Remus, however, knew something was very wrong and, once he had taken him to his office, he asked, "What's up?"

"I-I-I killed someone, Remus," Harry said and then he burst into loud tears.

Remus tried to hug Harry, but Harry refused to let him, angrily wiping away his tears. "I don't even know why I'm crying."

"Because you're relieved," Remus said, totally understanding. "I did the same after I first killed someone. I know you must feel terrible, but I also want you to know that I'm not angry with you, Harry."

"I feel so ashamed," Harry said, wiping his eyes again.

"Tell me what happened," Remus said gently.

And so Harry told him. "I thought he was going to kill me or give me away... I didn't know what else to do..."

Remus stopped him in his tracks. "Harry, I know you would never kill someone without good reason, but I'll still need to see your memory."

After watching it, Remus praised Harry. "You did really well to keep your head, and I believe that I can safely say that if you hadn't attacked when you did, that man would have either killed you or given you away, as you thought he would."

"Will I get into trouble?" Harry asked nervously.

Remus shook his head. "You're an Unspeakable, Harry, and in a case like this it places you above prosecution. I won't, of course, be showing your memory to Bones. I'll ask Ignotus to sanction a Priority One block."

"Who do you think was behind the gold mask?" Harry wondered if Remus believed it was Voldemort, as he did.

"It may have been Voldemort, or it could have been Sirius," Remus said. "It would make more sense for it to be Sirius, as I've never known Voldemort to hide behind a mask before."

"But that Death Eater called him 'my Lord'," Harry pointed out.

"I still think it could have been Sirius," Remus decided. "He may have been elevated for his services."

"He was vicious, whoever it was," Harry said, shuddering as he remembered the Cruciatus being cast. "I don't think I'm ever going to be able to master that spell."

"And I won't force you to," Remus said, reiterating his previous comments about not forcing anything upon Harry. "But at least you know now firsthand what sort of thing you'll be up against."

"I'd rather have gone without it," Harry said.

Remus put his arm around him. "Let's get you to my place."

Remus' Home

Even though he had been given a nutritional potion by the healer and warned to stick to bland foods for a few days, Harry ignored the warning when he sat at the table and saw the huge spread that Macclesby had put on the table. "I am so hungry." He then grabbed a bacon sandwich and began eating.

Remus smiled indulgently at him. "I had a sneaking suspicion that you wouldn't turn down the food, especially after what I saw in your cage at the vets."

Harry swallowed the mouthful of bacon he had just taken before answering, "It smelt disgusting. I was starving but I couldn't eat it."

Remus heard his fireplace pinging and he hurried over to check who it was. "I had a feeling it wouldn't be long before the Weasleys arrived. I sent a message before we came here to tell them you were safe."

Harry's brunch was interrupted momentarily as he was hugged by every member of the Weasley family, even Ginny, although once again Percy and Bill were missing. Harry grinned at Ron, who was looking at the food on the table. "I'm hungry but I don't think I can eat all of this on my own."

In the end everyone, including Remus, tucked into the huge spread, most of their appetites having been dulled by Harry's disappearance. As he ate, Harry told everyone what had happened, only missing out what he had done to the Death Eater.

Ron's eyes were as wide as saucers when Harry mentioned the man in the gold mask and that he had been called 'my Lord' by a follower. "It was You-Know-Who, wasn't it?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know but I think it had to be, or maybe Sirius Black." He then continued with his tale, right up until Remus found him, omitting the bit about his embarrassment at having to perform his bodily functions as a dog.

Fred, however, realized this, and he began to start to rib Harry, only for George to uncharacteristically bark at his twin, "Shut it, Fred. You've got no idea of what Harry must have gone through."

Molly was worried about George; ever since the Tournament he had been quiet and most definitely not himself. "George is right, Fred. Now, Harry, because you've already sat your exams, you won't be returning for the last week of school."

Harry immediately became agitated. "But what about Hermione? I want to see her before she leaves for Sydney."

"She's already in Sydney with her father," Remus said softly. "As Arthur explained, we all thought you'd died and Hermione was

distraught. Professor Flitwick arranged for her to leave by international portkey."

"Does she know I'm okay?" Harry asked.

Remus shook his head. "We didn't want to have to tell her that we now believed you were alive, only for something to go wrong."

"Can I see her?" Harry asked, his thoughts with his girlfriend.

"I thought you might say that," Molly said, having already anticipated Harry's request. "And Remus is going to accompany you to Sydney. I'd like to go but I have other responsibilities here."

"I'll pay for any charges," Harry offered, suddenly remembering that international portkeys weren't cheap.

"It's coming out of the money we receive to take care of you," Arthur told him, and he was unsurprised when Harry frowned. "And no arguing! Two hundred galleons a month is a stupendous amount and we don't use most of it as it is."

Harry was used to Molly being the driving force behind the Weasley family, but Arthur's stern voice brooked no countenance and he reluctantly smiled at the Weasley patriarch. "Thank you."

"You'll be able to spend a week in Sydney," Molly told him. "And then you'll be returning to the Burrow, where Justin, Bethany, Parvati, Susan and Neville will be joining you."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, only to close it again as Arthur shot him a stern look to match the voice he had just used and Harry instead found himself thanking both Weasley elders.

Only once everyone had left, and it was just Harry and Remus, did Harry finally ask how Remus had found him. Remus made a confession. "I was actually following you around the maze, so I knew that you were in your Animagus form."

Harry was shocked to hear this. "I thought I was going to die in the quicksand. Why didn't you help me?"

"Because if I had, I would have died," Remus said.

"Why?" Harry asked, not understanding.

Remus explained what he been told and had confirmed during his reading of the Rules. "Because the Rules of the Tournament don't allow outside interference – to do so is punishable by death."

"But Hagrid showed me the dragons," Harry pointed out. "And Charlie told me they were part of the competition. And Hermione told me what the egg said."

Remus was unsurprised to discover what Hagrid had done. "That might be so, but what they did was not direct interference during a task. If it had been, they would have died."

"Then I'm glad you didn't help me," Harry said.

"If you hadn't gotten out on your own, Harry, then I would I have helped you," Remus said softly, his face adding conviction to his words.

Harry stared in surprise at Remus. "But you'd have died."

"I know," Remus said, giving Harry a gentle smile. "But better me than you."

Not wanting to go down that road, Harry let the subject drop. "Okay, so you knew I was in my dog form, so how did you find me?"

"I knew what breed of dog you were, although I had to look it up..."

"What am I?"

"An Anatolian shepherd dog," Remus said before continuing. "When Sirius escaped, because I knew his Animagus was a black dog, I, and some other of my team members, began to set up a network that would let us discover if any black stray dogs had been found and taken to dogs' home, the RSPCA or to vets' practices. I know it was a long shot but I wasn't about to leave any stone unturned. Of course with the network still in place, it was simply a case of checking the most recent reports for any large stray dogs that were possibly injured. It took almost two days, but in the end I found you."

"I wanted to change back sooner but I was afraid of ripping open my wounds and I didn't really feel like myself until the day before you found me," Harry said. "Another day though and I would have done it."

"You do realize that your stomach is going to scar, don't you?" Remus asked. "Your wounds weren't treated quickly enough."

Harry shrugged. "I can live with that; I could have ended up dead."

"For a short time, I actually thought you were," Remus said. Then he got up. "I know you aren't going to like this but I think you should get some sleep – your healer said it will be a few days before you're well enough to travel, so I think we'll delay our trip until then. Even so, the trip to Sydney is going to take three portkey jumps and we need to leave at least three hours in between each one for you to recover."

Harry was willing to do whatever it took. "I'm okay with that."

"Off you go then."

Remus then waited until Harry had left the room and headed up the corridor, before he slumped over the table, his head in his hands. He had come so close to losing Harry, and Remus was unable to stop the tears that ran through his fingers, his pent-up anxiety and fear now fading away as relief took their place. He had no idea that in his room, having cast a silencing spell, Harry was doing the same.

Sydney, Australia – two days later

Harry looked around the hotel room with interest. "It's weird to think that we're in a different country on the other side of the world and we only left England six hours ago. It would take a whole day by plane."

"It takes longer when you think about checking in, collecting luggage and everything else that Muggle travel entails," Remus said as he used a spell to unpack. "I suppose you want to go and see Hermione now."

Harry nodded, although he yawned. "Yeah."

"Catch." Remus threw over a vial of pepper-up. "You'll be asleep if you don't take it," he warned, when Harry baulked.

Harry did as he was told and, after shuddering, he immediately felt much better. "Where does she live?"

"Down by the Harbor," Remus told him.

"How will we get there if it's a Muggle house?" Harry asked, as he headed into the bathroom to wash up before they left.

"I have apparition co-ordinates to a nearby point," Remus responded, pulling out a fresh shirt from the wardrobe into which his clothes had flown.

"I won't be long," Harry called out before closing the bathroom door.

Harry had no problem apparating to the co-ordinates, shunning Remus' offer of assistance. He looked around at the fairly large homes that lined the road onto which they walked. "They're not as big as Hermione's last house."

"They're still more than I could ever afford," Remus said as he checked the address of the first house they passed. "The house should be this way."

Harry discovered he was nervous as he made his way up the pathway that ran alongside the bush lined driveway. Remus placed a hand on his shoulder. "Take a deep breath."

Harry did so and then reached up and rang the doorbell.

Hearing the doorbell, Lester sighed, hoping that it hadn't woken up Hermione. She had been having terrible nightmares about Harry ever since she had arrived four days ago, and she had finally fallen into a relatively nightmare free sleep by the pool a few hours earlier. Unfortunately the sound of the doorbell carried throughout the entire house. Glancing at his daughter, he was relieved to see she was still sleeping, and he got up and made his way to the front door before the bell was rung again. Opening it up, he took a step backwards in shock. "Harry?"

"Hello, Sir," Harry said politely, noticing how white the man had gone. "Um, can we come in?"

"Of course," Lester said, stepping aside. He held out his hand to Remus. "Remus, it's good to see you again and quite shocking to be truthful."

Remus shook Lester's hand. "I would have forewarned you, but Harry wanted to come to break the news to Hermione in person."

Lester's face became troubled. "She's asleep by the pool. She's not been doing too well. She was going to withdraw from Hogwarts."

Harry immediately felt alarmed. "And move here?"

"Yes," Lester confirmed. "But now that you've miraculously returned from the dead, I have a funny feeling that that might change."

Harry let out a relieved sigh. "Can I speak to her?"

Lester pointed in the direction of the pool. "Just keep walking straight ahead." He turned to Remus. "I don't know about you, but I need a drink."

"I'd be happy to join you," Remus said and he followed Lester off to his study.

Harry stepped out onto the pool deck to the sight of a large and very green garden. The pool itself was built in a huge kidney design with a diving board at one end. At the other end there were some chairs, several tables and a very large built in barbecue. Hermione was on the far side of the pool, stretched out on a lounge with a lightweight piece of material over her and an umbrella opened up to provide her with some shade. Harry set off around the pool. When he reached her lounge, he gingerly sat down opposite and took hold of Hermione's hand. "Hermione?"

Hermione failed to stir and so Harry said her name a little louder, gently squeezing her hand as he did so. Hermione jumped awake and blinked several times before she realized who was sitting there. "Oh my God, Harry!"

Harry was pulled forward and he tumbled on top of Hermione, her arms going around him, as she cried into his chest. Then she released him and hit him sharply in the chest, her relief somehow changing to momentary anger. "I thought you'd died!"

"Remus and Aunt Molly told me," Harry said as he sat upright and once again took Hermione's hand. "But they were wrong."

Hermione used her free hand to try and brush away the tears that were still falling. "What happened?"

So once again Harry told his story, again omitting what he had done to the Death Eater. "...and that's basically it."

By now, Hermione had stopped crying and she was wearing a scowl. "You beat me to become an Animagus!"

Harry couldn't help it, he burst out laughing. "I almost died and you're miffed because I beat you to become an Animagus?"

Hermione gave Harry a sheepish smile. "I know, but I really wanted to be first at it."

"I could ask Remus to obliviate you and pretend you got there first," Harry offered. "And being able to produce a Patronus first is still up for grabs."

Hermione hit Harry again. "Idiot!" Then she swung her legs off the lounge. "I need to get dressed."

It was only then that Harry noticed the small chocolate colored bikini that his girlfriend was wearing, the bikini having been hidden by the throw. "That's a nice outfit."

Hermione blushed and resisted the temptation to cover herself up. "Daddy took me shopping yesterday to try and cheer me up."

Harry became serious again. "Hermione, I'm sorry if I upset you."

"It wasn't your fault," Hermione said, hugging him close. "I'm just glad that everyone was wrong."

Harry wrapped his arms around his girlfriend and kissed her. "So am I."

Hermione let Harry hold her for a few minutes more, before she kissed him again and reluctantly drew away from him. "I really do need to get dressed and then we can ask Daddy to take us out for dinner." She grinned at Harry as her stomach grumbled. "I haven't really been eating."

"I know how that feels," Harry said wryly.

It then occurred to Hermione that there was no way Harry would be travelling alone. "Who came with you?"

"Remus," Harry said as he walked hand in hand with Hermione as they headed inside. "He's with your dad."

"Probably in the study," Hermione guessed. "Did Daddy keel over when he saw you?"

"No, but he did turn white," Harry said as they stepped into the house. "I'd better wait here while you get dressed."

"I won't be long and then we can go out to dinner," Hermione said as she ran lightly up the stairs.

Unfortunately for him, Harry's week in Australia was over in the blink of an eye, and after several long goodbyes, he finally let Hermione go. "I'll see you in three weeks."

"I can't wait," Hermione said softly.

Harry gave her one last kiss before stepping away and taking hold of the rope that Remus was holding. He had no chance to say anything else as he vanished.

Next Chapter: George has a serious problem; Remus gets into trouble - should be posted on Monday.

Chapter 44: Helping a Friend

Harry looked down at the sheet of parchment and let out a sigh of relief. "I did okay."

Molly held out her hand. "May I?" She glanced down at Harry's results:

Ancient Runes: A
Arithmancy: E
Astronomy: A
Charms: O
Defense Against the Dark Arts: O
Herbology: E
History of Magic: O
Potions: O
Transfiguration: E

Ron was practically chomping at the bit. "How did he do?"

"Very well," Molly said, smiling brightly at Harry. "And I see you've been made a prefect."

Harry's smile grew wider. "Yeah. I really didn't expect that. I thought they'd give it to Justin."

Remus, who had hand delivered the results, shook his head. "Apparently the teachers felt that Justin has enough on his plate already since he's taking over the captaincy of the quidditch team, and Professor Sprout believed you were the best person for prefect."

"Do you know who the other prefects are?" Harry asked with interest.

Remus listed them. "Hannah is your opposite, Gryffindor has gone to Dean Thomas and Hermione Granger; Slytherin to Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson; and Ravenclaw to Padma Patil and Terry Boot."

Harry shot Ron a look of commiseration. "Sorry, mate."

Ron's face was glum. "It's okay."

"And now we know that, I'd like to see your results, Ron," Molly told her youngest son.

Ron nervously unfolded the parchment and his disappointment showed on his face. "Harry did much better."

Molly beckoned to him, and she took the parchment that her son was obviously reluctant to hand over.

Astronomy: A
Care of Magical Creatures: E
Charms: A
Defense Against the Dark Arts: E
Divination: O
Herbology: E
History of Magic: A
Potions: A
Transfiguration: A

Molly was disappointed with her son's results, but she didn't show it. "You did very well, Ron."

"No, I didn't," Ron argued. "I only got one Outstanding and that's because I made up a load of stuff."

Harry hid his grin at Molly's exasperated look.

"Ronald Weasley, making up stuff is no way to pass an exam!"

"But it worked," Ron argued. "At least for Divination anyway."

Harry decided to try and help Ron out. "So do you know what you're taking?"

Ron shrugged. "I dunno. I don't want to do Divination though. What about you?"

Harry looked down at his results. "I was thinking of dropping Runes and Astronomy, but doing everything else."

Ron glanced back down at his own results. "I won't be able to take Potions. I didn't even get an E let alone the O Snape wants." He glanced at Harry. "How did you manage an O?"

"Hermione gave me a little extra coaching when we all were meeting on a Tuesday night," Harry reminded Ron. "But to be honest even though Snape's the teacher, I'm actually enjoying it."

"I hate him!" Ron exclaimed. "I think he's the reason why I did so badly."

"If that's true and you want to continue learning more about Potions, I'd be happy to teach you during the holidays," Molly offered.

Ron hurriedly shook his head. "Not really." He then glanced at his mother. "I never knew you held a mastery in Potions until you taught at Hogwarts."

Molly smiled at her son. "There are probably plenty of things you don't know about me, Ron."

Ron was quite sure that there were plenty of things he didn't want to know and so he changed the subject back to the results. "I don't like Creatures much either, so I think I'll drop Potions and Astronomy and maybe Creatures but although it's boring I'll carry on with Divination."

Molly was well aware that Ron would moan if she complained and so she simply reiterated her offer. "Don't forget, if you need to learn more about Potions, just ask."

"Yeah, okay," Ron said, although he had absolutely no intention of doing so.

Harry glanced over at the twins. "How did you two do in your NEWTs?"

Both of the twins grinned, George's smile still a little restrained as it had been since the Triwizard Tournament. "Well, we passed Potions, Charms and Transfiguration with Outstandings. Everything else we got an Acceptable in except for Runes where I got an O and Fred got an E."

Molly's lips tightened. "I know you both were capable of so much more."

Fred shrugged. "It's not as if it matters. We've made enough money from our mail order business that we can set up a shop somewhere and we don't need exams for that."

As she had with Ron, Molly let it drop. "As long as you can support yourself once you leave the Burrow."

George frowned. "We don't have to leave yet though, do we?"

Molly was shocked that George was even asking. "You will always have a home here, George, and I'm in no rush to see you gone. I just want you to be able to support yourself when you eventually do."

"We'll both do fine," Fred said, and he nodded to George. "Come on."

Remus couldn't help but overhear the boys' conversation once they were out of earshot.

"How long are you going to keep hiding the truth, George?"

"For as long as it takes."

The sound was then cut off as the twins entered their soundproofed room.

It was only after Harry, Ron and Ginny had all gone upstairs that Remus turned to Molly. "I think something is wrong with George."

Molly agreed with Remus. "He's not been himself since the Tournament. At first I thought it was because he lost, but I know there's something else bothering him."

"I didn't mean to listen in but I heard Fred asking George how long he was going to keep hiding the truth," Remus revealed. "I don't know what they were talking about though."

"I'm not going to pressure George," Molly said after a few moments thought, even though her first instinct was to do exactly that. "I'm sure he'll tell me when he's ready."

In the end though it was Harry that George confided in, when Harry found him in tears behind a tree a few days later, something that shocked Harry to the core. "George, what's wrong?"

George hurriedly wiped his eyes and got up. "Nothing."

Harry grabbed his arm. "You've not been yourself since I got back here from Sydney. Please, tell me what's wrong."

George sank down. "I saw someone die at the Tournament, Harry."

"I know," Harry said, Remus having told him what had happened. "And I'm sorry."

George shuddered and, even though Harry had said he already knew, George still went on. "It all happened so fast. A Death Eater came out of nowhere and then an Unspeakable, and then more Death Eaters, and then... and then..."

"I've seen someone die before, George," Harry said, understanding more than George could know. "I know how horrible it is. But it will get better." At least Harry hoped it would, as despite his words to George, he himself was still having terrible nightmares.

"No, it won't," George said dismally, swiping angrily at the tears that had started again. "It won't ever get better."

Harry suddenly realized that something else must have gone on for George to be this upset and, although he knew pretty much what had happened from Remus, he still encouraged George to talk it out, hoping to get to the root of what was wrong. "What exactly happened, George?"

"I was about to levitate up to the Cup as I'd already failed to summon it, when I heard a noise behind me, and so I turned around to see a man in a white mask was standing there. That's when the Unspeakable appeared, but so did four more Death Eaters and they took out the Unspeakable. I thought I was going to die when the first Death Eater I'd seen sent a spell at me. But I didn't, I collapsed but then so did he, grabbing his head and screaming as he dropped. As I lay there, I heard a man's voice say 'he's dead' and that's the last thing I remember. I really thought he'd just stunned me," George said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I came to before I reached

the infirmary and I told Madam Pomfrey I was fine. It was afterwards, when I..." Here George stopped, his voice choking up.

"When you what?" Harry asked softly.

George swallowed hard several times, before he finally gained control of himself. "When I tried to cast a spell. I tried again and again but I couldn't do it, Harry, I couldn't do it." He then buried his head in his knees and wept.

Harry didn't know what else to do except to comfort his friend, slipping his arm around his shoulders. He knew better than to tell him it would be okay as he had no idea if it would be.

The two boys sat together for a long time, before George stopped crying and lifted his head up. "You can't tell Mum and Dad, Harry."

"But they're going to find out eventually," Harry pointed out.

George's mouth set into a mutinous line. "No!"

Harry backed off. "Okay, but how about talking to someone else, another adult maybe?"

"You're talking about Remus, aren't you?" George guessed, well aware that Harry had every confidence in the man that George believed was simply Harry's teacher.

Harry nodded. "If you don't want him to, he won't tell anyone."

"I don't know," George said, although deep down he wanted nothing more than to turn to someone who might be able to help him.

Harry spent the next thirty minutes trying to talk George around until he eventually succeeded. However, it was almost three days before Remus responded to Harry's letter, and he arrived at the Burrow late one night after dinner. Harry knew everyone would wonder what was so important, including Remus.

"You said it was a matter of urgency, Harry, and so I firecalled when I got your letter. Molly told me you were fine and this is the first chance I've had to get back."

Molly stepped over to Harry. "You do know that you can talk to me or Arthur about anything, don't you? You don't have to contact Remus."

Harry felt more than a little guilty at worrying Remus and probably upsetting Molly. "It really is something I can't talk to anyone but Remus about."

Arthur nodded towards his study. "Remus, you know where my study is by now."

Once inside, Remus closed the door and set up a privacy bubble. "What's wrong, Harry?"

"It's not me, it's George," Harry said, and then he relayed what George had told him.

Remus knew that whatever he had expected to hear, it most certainly hadn't been this. "Poor kid."

"Do you think it's permanent?" Harry asked.

"Until I test George, I won't know." He looked over at Harry. "You do know that Molly and Arthur will have to be told."

"Not by us," Harry said firmly. "I promised George that neither of us would say anything to them."

Remus was more than a little annoyed at Harry. "Harry, you shouldn't have promised something on my behalf without speaking to me first."

"Yes, I should," Harry argued. "He's really upset, Remus, and I know he's frightened. He's also scared that his parents won't take the news well. Please, for me, will you help him without telling them?"

Remus sighed and agreed to Harry's plea. "I won't tell them straightaway, not without consulting George. But given that it is not a matter of major urgency, I'm afraid it won't be tonight, as I need to get back."

"Where are you based?" Harry asked, wondering from where Remus had come.

"Adelaide," Remus responded. "Taking you to visit Hermione wasn't the only thing I did when I was in Australia."

Harry was astounded. "You came all the way back from Australia for me?"

"Yes," Remus said in a tired voice. "And I really have to go back, Harry, but I'll return as soon as I can to talk to George."

"Thanks," Harry said, feeling more than a little guilty. "I'm sorry to have dragged you all this way, Remus."

"You didn't know," Remus said, although it was obvious from his tone that he was still far from pleased. "I have to go. Give my apologies to the Weasleys."

Molly glanced over as Harry came out alone. "Where's Remus?"

"He had to leave," Harry said, having told Remus he would give his apologies. "I think I disturbed him in the middle of his trip abroad."

Like his wife, Arthur guessed that Remus had been on a mission. "Well, it was good of him to take the time to come and talk to you then. Did you get what's bothering you sorted out?"

"Not yet, but it will be," Harry said, not daring to look at George in case he gave anything away.

George was a bag of nerves by the time Remus returned almost a week later. Remus, however, kept his word and kept his counsel, finally offering after a few hours to take Harry out to Diagon Alley to do his shopping. Taking his cue from Remus, George also said he wanted to go and scout out some possible sites for his and Fred's new planned store. Forewarned, Fred decided not to go, and so it was the trio who left the Burrow.

On arriving at Diagon Alley, Remus led both boys up a side street, before pulling out his cloak and slipping it on. He then passed a surprised George a similar one with a warning. "Do not say anything. Just follow me and do as Harry does."

Harry took his own cloak and followed Remus, a somewhat bemused following George in their wake. George was even more bemused by the time they arrived at Remus' office and Remus removed his cloak. "Um, where is this?"

"My office," Remus said as he sat on the edge of his desk. "George, before I make any sort decision as to how to try and help you, I need to see your memory of what happened."

George was still flabbergasted that Remus had an office in the Ministry. "You're not really a teacher, are you?"

"Actually, no," Remus said, as he walked over to the wall and began the procedure to withdraw his pensieve. "I'm assigned to take care of Harry, although as you already know, that hasn't always been possible."

"So you're a bodyguard?"

"Sort of," Remus said, and he withdrew his wand. "This won't hurt, George. I just need you to relax so that I can extract your memory of what happened."

"I told Harry I didn't hear what the spell was," George barked out, his nerves going into overdrive.

Remus could see that George was already getting worked up about what had happened. "Calm down, George."

George reacted to Remus' gentle voice and took several deep breaths. "Sorry, but this is really freaking me out."

"Why didn't you tell your parents?" Remus asked, lowering his wand.

"I'm afraid of what they might say," George said in a quiet voice.

"I've known your parents for a long time and I don't imagine that they'd be anything but supportive."

George disagreed, his voice now beginning to rise. "I'd be an embarrassment."

Remus did not want this blowing up into a full scale argument and so he backed off the subject. "We can talk about that in a while. Right now, I'd like to see your memory. Think of what happened at the end of the Tournament and, don't worry, as I've just said, this won't hurt."

George steeled himself nevertheless but felt nothing but a tickling sensation. He watched in fascination as Remus extracted a stream of strange matter from his head and placed it into the pensieve. "That's my memory?"

"It is," Remus said before holding out his hand. "Do you want to see?"

George nodded and took Remus' hand, Harry taking his other one. George looked around the grayish mist that permeated the world they had entered. "What is this?"

"This is what the pensieve looks like until a memory has been activated," Remus explained, and as he spoke George's memory came alive.

All three watched in silence as the memory played out, Remus replaying three times the part where the Death Eater cast the spell. He then pulled both boys out of the memory. "I know what spell he cast on you."

George was now really scared by the solemn look on Remus' face. "What was it?"

"A spell to strip magic," Remus said, not looking forward to what he had to tell George about the spell. "I've seen it cast before and know the incantation."

"And how do I get my magic back?" George asked, his voice trembling, as he already suspected the answer.

"You can't, not without doing what the Death Eater did to you," Remus told him. "I'm so very sorry."

George didn't dissolve into tears as Harry expected. Instead he knocked the pensieve off the table, angry words spewing from his lips and he then turned on Remus.

Harry yelled out a warning. "George, don't, you'll hurt yourself."

George, however, was too angry to listen and he lashed out at Remus, Remus grabbing George's wrist and stopping his fist from connecting. George raised his other one and Remus did the same, tugging George towards him and holding the tall redhead against him as he finally dissolved into the tears Harry had expected to see sooner.

Listening to the older boy's harsh sobs, Harry could feel tears in his own eyes and he met Remus' gaze, unsurprised to see that he too had damp eyes, George's pain getting to both of them. Eventually, George cried himself out and literally collapsed into Remus' arms.

Remus steered him into his seat. "Harry, get me a brandy."

Harry was well aware that Remus kept a small selection of alcohol in one the cabinets that lined the room, and he swiftly did as he was told, passing it to Remus, who handed it to George. "Drink this."

George numbly took the brandy and knocked it back in one go, shuddering as the harsh liquor slid down his throat. He looked up at Remus in a daze. "I hoped I'd get it back. That someone would know of a way. Fred and I tried to find something but we couldn't. When Harry asked you for help, I let myself believe that everything would be okay."

"I understand," Remus said, and he handed the glass to Harry. "Put this away."

Harry cleaned the glass with a spell and replaced it in the drawer, before silently sitting down as Remus talked softly with George, explaining that he needed to check his magical levels. George balked, too frightened to truly have to face up what that would mean, and Remus remained patient, gently talking to George.

After almost an hour, George stood up, and although he was terribly pale, and most definitely frightened, he announced, "I'm ready."

After putting their cloaks back on, the three of them made their way to one of the rooms where magical power was measured and George stepped onto the scale when instructed to do so. He went to

put his hands on the globe, only to pull them back. "I don't know if I can do this."

"You can do it," Remus said encouragingly.

George took a huge breath before placing his hands on the globe. Then he looked down. "Forty-six. What does that mean?"

Remus let out a sigh of relief. "It means that you're not a squib." He then explained how the Magus scale worked.

George's legs gave way and he sank to the floor. However he was still confused. "If I'm still a wizard, then why can't I do magic anymore?"

"You can," Remus told him. "But I believe that your wand is no longer suited to you. We need to get you a new one."

"And then I'll be able to do magic again?"

"Yes, but there will be some spells you'll never be able to cast," Remus said, wanting George to understand that his life would never be quite the same again. "But I expect you'll be able to cast everyday spells such as lighting spells, household spells..."

George interrupted him. "What about spells such as..."

Harry listened as George began to reel off a huge list of spells, Remus patiently answering: yes, no, or maybe. George didn't look very happy by the time he had exhausted the list. "I need most of those spells to help me when I'm making stuff for the shop we're planning to open."

"I'm sure Fred will understand," Remus said, as he gathered from George's earlier comment that Fred was well aware of his twin's predicament.

George had to agree. "He's already said he does but either way I'm going to be a burden."

"You can still make potions," Remus reminded him. "You should have enough magic to carry out many of the spells that are required in potion making."

George still, however, felt impotent. "It's not going to be enough. What the hell am I going to do?"

"I think you should take things one step at a time," Remus suggested. "First of all, we should get you a new wand, and..."

A knock sounded on the door and Remus threw up his hood, indicating that George should do the same, Harry already having done so. He knew who it was the moment after he called 'come in'. "Sir, what can I do for you?"

"I think we need to have a little talk," the cloaked figure said, before turning to Harry. "Please take your guest to your office, Risus."

After entering Harry's office, which he had been granted a few months earlier, George pounced. "Risus?"

Harry nodded and sat down on the blue sofa he had picked out to put in the room, which although small, had a real-time vista like Remus' but this one was of Big Ben. "It's my code name."

"You've got to be shitting me," George said, still reeling from what this meant. "You can't be an Unspeakable."

"Why else do you think I'm dressed like this and have an office?" Harry asked, not having dispensation from Remus to discuss himself and therefore avoiding answering the question directly.

It was then that George clicked, particularly as he recalled the cloak Remus had also been wearing. "Which means that Remus is no ordinary bodyguard. He's an Unspeakable as well, isn't he, and that was his boss he needed to talk to about me, wasn't it?"

"I can't answer either of those questions," Harry said, not having dispensation from Remus to do so.

George, however, was far from stupid and also well aware of the Unspeakables because of his father. "I know who's in charge, Harry. It's some bloke named Ignotus. I always expected him to be

beefier." He then went on before Harry could comment. "Do you think Remus will get into trouble for bringing me in here?"

Harry could see no harm in answering this. "More than likely."

"I hope he doesn't lose his job," George said worriedly.

Harry was about to respond when a knock sounded on the door. "Hood up."

Remus came into the room after giving Harry and George time to put up their hoods. "You can take them down. It's only me."

"Did you get into trouble?" George immediately asked, still very much concerned that Remus had gotten into hot water for helping him.

"Yes," Remus said, not about to lie.

"Big trouble?" Harry asked, now also worried that his favor had gotten Remus into serious trouble.

"It could have been worse," Remus said, not revealing exactly what had been said.

"You're an Unspeakable, aren't you?" George asked, wanting to hear it from the horse's mouth.

"I am, and as you've probably guessed, so is Harry," Remus said before surprising George with his next comment. "And the upshot of my conversation with my boss is that Ignotus wants you to work for us, but obviously not as an Unspeakable."

"Why?" George asked bluntly. "I have nothing to offer."

"Ignotus thinks differently and you were going to be approached shortly," Remus revealed. "However, my bringing you here has inspired him to bring it forward."

"But I'm magically deficient now," George said sulkily. "I know he's just offering out of sympathy."

Remus understood why George was being so defensive. "George, Ignotus is well aware of your capabilities as well as your limitations. However, your ability for combining spells most others would not even dream of is what got his attention."

"How could he know what I'm capable of?"

"Harry has been quite forthcoming," Remus revealed, gaining himself a glare from Harry. "Sorry, Harry, but some of the tricks George has pulled off have been quite spectacular."

"I had help with some of them," George said, still not willing to accept what he was hearing.

"Your earlier pranks on Malfoy, I presume," Remus said, privy to what George had pulled. "And you're forgetting that I've also seen some of the feats you managed in Hogwarts and before you deny it, I know you pulled the stunt with the trick door handles."

George nodded. "I stole the idea though. I heard about some kids doing it years before, only they knocked students out. I thought it was a cool idea so I nicked it."

"Thanks for the compliment." Remus was grinning as he said it.

George gave Remus a disbelieving look. "You're too straight-laced."

Remus decided to let George in on a little secret. "You, my dear George, are looking at one the biggest troublemakers Hogwarts have ever seen. I believe you might know me as Mr. Moony. And my friends were Mr. Prongs, Mr. Padfoot and Mr. Wormtail."

Remus all at once shot up in George's estimation. "You made the Marauders' Map?"

Remus nodded. "Together with Harry's father, a boy named Peter Pettigrew, and Sirius Black."

"You were friends with Sirius Black?"

"He was my best friend and he was Padfoot," Remus said a little grimly. "And when we made the Map, I honestly thought we'd be friends forever, although I now know how naïve that hope was."

"I'm sorry," George said, able to see that even now it pained Remus to talk about Sirius. "And I'm also sorry about the Map, I'm afraid I don't have it anymore."

Harry gave George a massive grin. "I know, I do. Remus nicked it off Bones."

"Wicked!"

Remus called a halt to the frivolities. "It is, but right now, we have more important things to discuss, such as whether you're going to accept Ignotus' offer."

George mulled it over. "If you knew that Charlie had helped me, why hasn't he been offered the chance or Fred?"

"Charlie has always made it clear that his first love is dragons, something for which we don't really have any use," Remus said. "And Ignotus also knows from me via Harry that you, using in part some of the knowledge imparted from Mrs. Lovegood's spell books, have been the driving force behind most of your jokes and not your brother."

"So is Luna or Fred to be offered this opportunity?" George asked.

Remus shook his head. "No, as Luna's not exactly Unspeakable material and Fred simply isn't in your creative league."

George accepted that, but he still had not finished questioning Remus. "Would I have been offered this if I wasn't friends with Harry?"

"Your friendship with Harry has nothing to do with the offer," Remus clarified, wanting George to grasp that he had been offered the position on his abilities alone. "It's been made because we believe you can truly offer something useful to us. Obviously you wouldn't be creating jokes though, as your talents would be employed to help us develop items for use in our line of work."

"And if I say no?" George asked as Remus finished outlining why Ignotus wanted him.

"Then you'll be obliterated of any knowledge of what Harry and I are, and you'll merely think that I was able to somehow procure entrance to a power room," Remus said. "This is what I had originally planned to do."

"You were going to wipe my memories?"

"We have to protect ourselves."

"Are there any others like me?" George asked, before clarifying exactly what he meant. "You know, wizards who are almost squibs."

"A few, and as you're only working for the Unspeakables and won't be one of us, your magical potency isn't an issue," Remus told him.

"What sort of things will I be doing?" George asked, more than a little interested in the offer.

"Ignotus will be filling you in," Remus told him. "I'll take you to see him now."

When Remus returned he flopped onto the sofa next to Harry. "You owe me big time, Harry."

Harry knew then that Remus had glossed over how much trouble he had gotten into. "Did Ignotus come down hard on you?"

Remus nodded, admitting what he had not to George. "I got a Grade 'A' bollocking for leaving in the middle of a job and using a power room without permission, to say nothing of the fine of five hundred Galleons he imposed on me."

"I'll pay it for you," Harry offered and, when Remus went to refuse, he scowled at him. "Remus, you did this because I asked, and I'm not going to miss the money, but you are."

"Harry, I'm not exactly poor," Remus reminded him. "And I've been paid for both my services at Hogwarts and serving as an Unspeakable, plus any detective work I still do on the side."

"I'll still pay it," Harry said firmly, before bringing up the possibility of his own punishment. "As it's my fault, are you now going to chew me out?"

"In a moment and then, after I've said my piece, we'll let this drop," Remus said as he closed his eyes tiredly. When he opened them again, he turned his amber gaze on Harry, his expression stern. "Don't ever offer my services again without checking with me first. I understand why you did it, but you have no idea of the untenable position you put me in by doing so. I could have lost my standing as an Unspeakable."

Harry was hit with a massive wave of guilt. "I didn't realize."

"I know," Remus said, able to feel Harry's guilt. "As it was I got away lightly, mostly because I'm needed right now and because not everyone possesses my lupine talents. However, I'm not completely immune, so next time, please think before you open your mouth because I don't want it happening again."

Harry flushed. "It won't happen again, Sir. I really am sorry."

"Apology accepted." Remus yawned, and then, as he had promised, he dropped the subject. "Merlin, I'm so damn tired, I could cry."

"Do you have to go back to Adelaide?"

Remus shook his head. "Ignotus told me that my partner can finish up there as I have to go shopping to buy what I need for the upcoming school year."

"You're teaching at Hogwarts again?"

"I wasn't supposed to be, but Ignotus has ordered me back there to watch over you," Remus said, stretching as he opened his eyes. "And before you ask, yes, it's part of my punishment; yes, I'm happy to be seeing you; no, I really don't want to be at Hogwarts teaching a bunch of kids about history."

"I never did ask about Binns," Harry said, thinking about the teacher that Remus replaced the previous year. "But did you make him cross over?"

Remus had entertained the idea but thought it unfair. "If I'd exorcised him like that, he'd have lost his soul. I simply had the other Hogwarts ghosts take care of him for me. He's trapped somewhere. They'll let him go once I've left for good."

"Then I hope you have to stay until my seventh year," Harry said with a shudder. "Because I'll never pass my NEWT otherwise. Why did I change my mind about taking history without asking you about your plans?"

Remus gave Harry a smug look. "You should have asked me sooner what I'd done with Binns." He resignedly got to his feet. "Come on, let's go get some lunch and wait for George to finish."

"Do you think he'll take the offer?"

"Yes," Remus said, having been able to determine how George was feeling. "He wants to feel worthwhile again, and I think this will go a long way in helping with that."

"Did Ignotus really want him before this happened or was it something to do with sympathy?"

"As I told George, sympathy has no part in the Unspeakables, and it was at Ignotus' request that his invitation to work for us was brought forward." Remus put up his hood. "Let's go."

6th September 1996: Year Six

Harry entered Remus' office, wondering for what he had been called. "You wanted to see me?"

"It's about your cousin."

Harry paled. "He's dead?"

Remus shook his head. "No, but he was attacked again by Sirius."

Harry frowned. "I thought you said he'd been obliviated and moved to a place of safety."

"That's what I was told by Bones," Remus said in his defense. "But it appears that there's a leak in BritAD. Dudley is okay, but his foster

mother was badly injured this time. It's been decided to bring Dudley here for the time being, so that I can keep an eye on him."

"But he's essentially a Muggle," Harry said. "He doesn't know anything about magic anymore."

"He's already been briefed that his guardian is a squib and that because of that he might be in danger and that's why he's being brought here," Remus told Harry. "And so given the cover story, it has not been deemed necessary for him to be told that he knows you or anyone else here."

"Where will he stay?"

"In my rooms," Remus said, his voice tight, showing that he was far from happy with the situation.

"And the Headmaster just said yes?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Ignotus has filled Filius in on the situation," Remus revealed, not having had time to tell Harry yet.

Harry's eyes widening in understanding. "That's why you've been made Deputy Head, isn't it?"

Remus nodded. "Aurora no longer wanted the responsibility and Filius decided that I'd make a good replacement. He and Severus don't exactly see eye to eye."

"But what happens if Black is caught?" Harry asked. "You won't have to take care of me then."

"In exchange for allowing Dudley to stay here, I agreed to stick it out for the year," Remus said, although it was evident he was from happy with the situation.

"I bet you wish you'd never offered to look after me," Harry said, able to see how unhappy Remus was.

"Don't ever think that," Remus said firmly. "I told you that I'd take care of you, and if it means a little longer in Hogwarts then so be it. The only difference now that Filius knows the truth is that I can also

undertake a few local jobs on the side to try and help with the boredom."

"It still sucks though," Harry said, believing Remus was being noble.

Remus shrugged. "It does, but what choice do I have?"

Remus' unhappiness was to continue as it turned out that Dudley hadn't changed much; he was still lazy, self-centered and more than a little arrogant. Remus' hope of doing other things had faded as it became apparent that Dudley needed constant babysitting to keep him out of trouble, and after just over a month, Remus had almost reached breaking point. "I'm going to kill him myself at this rate."

Harry grinned at Remus as they hovered above Hogwarts' grounds, Justin spending time with his current girlfriend. "I bet this must be the first time you've ever been looking forward to your transformation."

Remus gave a wry smile. "You're right it is. I just hope I never get out while Dudley is here. I know for certain that the wolf in me wouldn't hesitate to take it out on his lazy, good-for-nothing hide."

"I really hoped he'd change if he didn't know anything about magic, but he doesn't look as if he has," Harry said with sadness in his voice. "I'm sorry that you've ended up being lumped with him just because he's my cousin."

Remus hadn't intended to make Harry feel guilty. "Harry, it's not your fault. If Dumbledore hadn't placed you with the Dursleys, then none of this would have happened."

"I still feel responsible for the current situation," Harry had to admit. "If he hadn't known me, then his life wouldn't be in danger and you wouldn't be stuck here with him."

"Perhaps he'll change, or maybe something will happen," Remus said. "One can only hope."

Laurifer House

It wasn't long before dawn when Sirius was woken up by Tom. "What do you want now?"

"You're going on another field trip," Tom said. "Get up and get dressed."

The Imperius potion being a permanent thing, Sirius had little choice but to do as he was told. "Where are we going?"

"To Hogwarts," Tom responded. "You're going to complete your failed mission."

"What failed mission?"

"To kill Dudley Ellis." Tom gave Dudley's current name so that there could be no mistake. "He's been moved for his safety to Hogwarts."

"I can't get into Hogwarts," Sirius said, pulling on a sweater. "If Flitwick has someone he wants to protect there, there will be wards in place."

Tom agreed. "There are not only wards, but also Aurors and Dementors."

Sirius paled. "Dementors?"

"You managed to get past them once and you will do so again. When we arrive, you will kill all the Aurors you come into contact with, except for one. You will use him or her to get you through the wards and into the grounds. Then you will stun them. Do not kill them, or you may set off the wards."

"What happens if they kill me first?" Sirius asked.

"I will be accompanying you and I will take care of anyone you do not," Tom responded, and he handed Sirius the same wand he had used before.

Sirius took the wand and looked down at it with loathing. "I won't do it."

"Yes, you will," Tom said impatiently.

Sirius shook his head and decided that the time had come to make a stand. "No, I won't." And then, because he was unable to attack Tom, Sirius turned the wand on himself.

Next Chapter: Remus ends up in Azkaban; Harry falls out with Amelia Bones.

Chapter 45: End of the Line

"Avada Kedav..." Sirius began to yell out.

"Crucio," Tom broke in, and he watched with satisfaction as the last syllable of the word 'Kedavra' changed into a scream and the wand dropped from Sirius' hand at the shock of the pain.

After Tom finally released the pain spell, Sirius lay there panting as Tom summoned the wand that Sirius had dropped. "You will never try to kill yourself again, and you will get up and take this wand and do exactly as I say."

His legs shaking, Sirius now had little choice but to take the wand and listen as Tom outlined what Severus had told him.

"I know that the main entrance to Hogwarts is locked and so you will need to find another way in." The only secret way that Tom was aware of was almost impossible to get into without getting wet and being able to speak Parseltongue. He also knew that Sirius could get in via the first years' entrance, but he wanted to see what Sirius had to say. "Do you know of any?"

"No," Sirius lied, now intent on doing everything he could to thwart the man.

"Tell me the truth," Tom demanded.

"I know of an entrance," Sirius had to admit.

"Where is it?" Tom asked.

The phrasing of the question allowed Sirius to pick an entrance of which he was aware, but wasn't the one he would use: the one he intended to use would hopefully mean that he would bump into less people. "I can get in via the boathouse where they take the first years but I'll have to swim across part of the lake to get into it."

"You'll do whatever you have to do," Tom said, before continuing. "Once inside the school, you will go to Lupin's rooms. If he or anyone else tries to stop you, then you will kill them."

Sirius shook his head. "No."

"You don't have any choice," Tom reminded him, before going on. "Once you've done the job, get out and head for apparition point 73 in Hogsmeade, where I will be waiting for you."

"Do you honestly think that I'll succeed?" Sirius questioned Tom's plan.

"That's your problem, not mine," Tom said, fully expecting Sirius to fail. "But if you are caught you will say nothing about where you've been, who I am or what you've experienced since we first met." After his order, Tom took Sirius' arm and disappeared with him to the potions room before finishing his sentence. "But first we need to get you something for those shakes." Tom shoved a vial at Sirius. "Drink this."

Sirius drank the potion and within a few minutes his shaking had subsided. Tom nodded. "Good. Get your wand ready. When we arrive outside of the gates, I'll take the Aurors on the right and you will kill all those on the left except for one. You won't alert them to my presence and you will carry this part out in a manner that is as expedient as possible."

Tom grabbed Sirius' arm again and they vanished. The moon was slowly sinking in the sky as they reappeared in the bushes outside of Hogwarts and Tom pushed Sirius forwards while he headed across to the other side of the trail. Channeling his hatred of Tom, Sirius quickly killed the first Auror with a whispered, "Avada Kedavra." Across the darkened trail a flash of green light also told him that Tom too was dealing with the Aurors as he had said he would.

Sirius' own attack had alerted the remaining two Aurors on his side to his presence and he now found himself facing a young woman who looked vaguely familiar, although Sirius had no idea who she was. This thought was put on ice though as Sirius was now presented with a choice. Another female Auror was with the woman he thought he recognized and, although he had no desire to harm either woman, he had to choose. And so, with Tom's warning about leaving an Auror alive still ringing in his ears, Sirius decided to kill the familiar woman's compatriot, while at the same time, firing back at the familiar woman.

Unaware that Sirius had sort of recognized her, Tonks was putting up a determined fight, but Sirius was an excellent dueler, even with just one wand and two opponents. In fact, Sirius had an innate talent for dueling. He had even defeated his school dueling teacher, Filius Flitwick, on more than one occasion, the first time as a fourth year, and, therefore, despite his rustiness and lack of a secondary wand, it wasn't long before he killed Tonks' companion and then overcame Tonks.

From out of the fading darkness, Tom came casually sauntering over. Spotting three bodies lying on the floor, he turned furiously on Sirius. "I told you to keep one alive."

"I did," Sirius said, pointing out a darkened outline. "That one is just stunned."

"Good," Tom said, removing Tonks' wands. And then, after the stunt Sirius had pulled earlier, Tom reiterated his instructions in a manner that he believed would afford Sirius no way out. "After reviving her, make sure she gets you through the wards. Then take her weapons with you and stun her. Under no circumstances are you to cast a spell on her that will set off any wards. After that you will avoid the Dementors by whatever means necessary but you will do it in a manner least likely to draw attention to you."

"I think that a bunch of Dementors chasing me is going to draw attention," Sirius remarked in a derogatory manner.

"Then tell me how you avoided them in Azkaban," Tom demanded.

Sirius had to tell him the truth. "I used my Animagus form to avoid them."

"Then you will do so again," Tom told him, before continuing with his instructions. "After avoiding the Dementors, you will instantly move to gain entrance to the school, where you will do nothing to give anyone any warning, unless you have no choice but to attack, in which case you will use as much force as is necessary to overcome and kill your opponent. If you make it successfully into the school, then go to Lupin's rooms where you will kill the Ellis boy." Tom moved away. "I'll be waiting for you at the agreed rendezvous point. And you will return to it as soon as you successfully complete your mission."

Sirius glanced over at the shadow in the moonlight. "And if I get caught?"

"Then I won't be seeing you again. Now revive her and carry out the plan," Tom ordered, fully expecting never to see Sirius again but unable to resist the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. He then vanished.

When Sirius revived her, Tonks began to struggle almost immediately, only stopping when Sirius whispered, "Imperio." Then he told her what he needed her to do.

As she walked through the school gates, Tonks quickly became aware that she was under attack and she began to fight against the curse's hold as she had been taught to during her training. But she snapped out of it moments too late and she had helped Sirius gain access to the school before she could come fully to her senses. As she did, Sirius dropped the underpowered curse, his hope of Tonks fighting off the curse and yelling for help now gone, and he whispered one final spell, Tonks slumping in his arms.

Sirius shivered as he felt the cold wave that signaled the advance of the Dementors. Glancing over at where the shadow of the Whomping Willow stood against the fading night, Sirius came up with a plan, one which wouldn't go against Tom's orders, but would enable him to save at least one innocent person from a fate worse than death.

Once he had ensured Tonks' safety, Sirius stood just inside the Whomping Willow, the air temperature dropping suddenly. He knew that the Dementors had to be outside and, as Tom had told him to, he was going to have to avoid them. Sirius was unfortunately aware, however, that once he had done so, apart from using a different entrance than the one he had told Tom he intended to use, he had no margin for error for tinkering with Tom's instructions.

After stilling the Willow and running to the left of the Dementors, he reactivated the tree leaving Tonks safely inside, before changing into his Animagus form as the Dementors turned on him. Making the most of their confusion at the sudden disappearance of their prey, Sirius bounded across the grounds, heading for a large clump of bushes not far from the entrance to the school.

Once there, Sirius reverted to his human form. Placing his hand against a plaque that was covered in grass and moss, he uttered, "Loyalty above all else". He gave one last look over his shoulder at the Dementors that were milling around, before a slab drew back allowing Sirius both entrance to the school and an escape, before it slid back into place again, locking out the Dementors, who quickly dissipated.

Remus' Rooms

Dudley lay on the bed watching the arms of the clock on the wall move forward. Although he could have gotten dressed and gone down for breakfast, Dudley was far too lazy to do so, and so instead he got up and padded into the kitchenette off the sitting room, hoping he wouldn't wake Remus up, who, for some reason Dudley could never work out, always knew he was up. Dudley, of course, had no idea that Remus was a werewolf, and, because of that Remus was not currently in his bedroom and was instead still locked up inside the Shrieking Shack, having only just transformed back into human form.

Dudley was walking back to his bedroom, having left everything he had used to make a sandwich out on the side, when he thought he heard a noise from outside the door. He then noticed the handle turning.

Suddenly very afraid, Dudley backed away in the direction of Remus' bedroom. When the handle was tried again, he bolted inside the bedroom, not bothering to knock. "Remus! Remus! Someone's trying to get in."

Having not arrived at Remus' room until very late due to a detention issued by Snape, which Harry just knew Snape had deliberately scheduled for a Saturday so that Harry would miss quidditch practice, Harry was still in bed. Therefore the sound of Dudley's yells came as something of an unwelcome shock, and Harry blearily sat up, trying to come fully awake. "Dudley?"

Dudley had met Harry on more than one occasion and he still had no idea that they were related or that Remus was Harry's guardian. He therefore immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion about

Harry's presence in Remus' bed. "That's just gross! You're half his age and a student."

More than a little annoyed with his cousin, Harry rolled his eyes as he shot out of the bed, grabbing his wands from the table beside him. "I have a girlfriend, Ellis. Remus is a friend and he's unavailable and so I said I'd stay with you."

"Okay, okay, but someone is trying to get in," Dudley repeated.

Now fully awake, Harry ran into the sitting room. Dudley was right and someone was trying the door handle. Harry immediately put a locking spell on the door from his side, hoping this would help. It didn't, as a few moments later, the door burst open and a man walked in.

Sirius' heart sank as he spotted Harry, having recognized him from his pictures in the newspaper. But having little choice but to continue with his mission, he closed the door behind him.

Harry yelled at his cousin, "Use the fireplace."

Dudley, however, froze, and it was left to Harry to stand up against the man Dudley knew had tried to kill him before.

Sirius immediately tried pleading with Harry, who was now standing between Sirius and Dudley. "Please move out of the way, Harry. I don't want to hurt you but I will have to kill you if you stand against me."

Although he was scared, Harry refused to budge. "I won't let you touch him, Black, so if you want him you're going to have to go through me."

With Harry's refusal, Sirius had no choice and he opened fire. "Reducto."

Harry dove and rolled out of the way, returning fire. "Reducto."

The two then fired several spells off against each other, the spells growing gradually darker on both sides, until finally Harry, who was quickly coming close to losing, used the only option he felt he had left. "Avada Kedavra."

Sirius stood for a moment in shock that Harry had used an Unforgivable against him. This gave Harry a chance to again hurl the same curse at Sirius, who only just managed to avoid it, the green light of yet another Killing Curse hitting the wall behind him, swiftly followed by a bloodletting curse. "Minuo Maximus."

Sirius shielded against the bloodletting curse before returning the same spell back at Harry, who also shielded. "James would be proud of you."

"I could hardly say he'd feel the same about you!" Harry snarled, and he fired off a blasting spell, which was absorbed by Sirius' shield. Harry then winced at the power of the blasting spell that Sirius returned.

"You fight well for someone of your age, and I'm sorry to do this, but I have a job to do and you're in my way," Sirius said, as he continued to send blasting spells at Harry's shield as he realized that this was obviously a weakness in Harry's armor, all the time hoping that somehow someone would find them in time to stop him from killing Harry.

Harry was now unable to return fire or to speak as he was busy trying to maintain his shield and he knew without a doubt he was going to lose. Backing up, he stumbled against a chair, forcing him to lose concentration, and Sirius took advantage of the moment, not wanting to cast the Killing Curse to finish Harry off, but still having to use a curse that would inevitably result in Harry's death. Sirius therefore deliberately chose a curse that was a derivative of the bloodletting curse and one that he knew might buy Harry a little time but not much. "Lente Mille Vengradis Sectum."

Harry screamed out in pain as thousands of cuts opened up on his body and he collapsed to his knees in pain. He was also blinded as blood began to run into his eyes. Aware he was going to die, Harry spat out the blood that had filled his mouth from the cuts in it, before yelling at his cousin, "Get out, Dudley."

Aware that Harry would bleed out within minutes, Sirius unwillingly left him to die and turned to face Dudley, who had managed to reach the fireplace, cowering inside of it. Sirius wrinkled his nose in disgust as it was obvious that Dudley had lost all control of his body

functions in his fear. Sirius looked down at the boy as he reluctantly said, "Avada Kedavra."

"Sanctum Potter," Dudley screamed out at the same time as Sirius cast the Killing Curse, throwing down green powder as a green light shot towards him.

Sirius was left standing staring at the empty fireplace and he wondered if the boy had survived or not. His mission now over, he grabbed floo powder to leave, only to be halted in his actions as the door flew open and Remus came dashing in: Remus had found Tonks unconscious in the tunnel and had revived her, Tonks quickly filling him in on what had happened, before Remus had set off for the school at a speed that meant he had left Tonks behind.

Inside the room, Remus took one look at the bloody state of Harry and aimed his wand at Sirius. "Avada Kedavra."

His spell was sent awry as Tonks, who had finally caught up with him, using a speed spell to do so, flew at Remus, sending his wand flying. "Professor, no!" She then turned her wand on her cousin. "You're going to pay for what you've done, Black."

"I've already beaten you once, girl," Sirius reminded her, as he faced off against Tonks and a wandless Remus, Tonks having Remus' secondary wand.

As Sirius aimed at Tonks, Remus took him by surprise by running towards him at full speed. Sirius swung his wand around, aiming for Remus' heart. "Reducto."

Although the spell blew a hole straight through Remus' shoulder as he ducked left, he kept on going, smashing into Sirius and pushing him into the wall. He then closed his fingers around Sirius' throat and began to choke him. "You're going to die as you should have done years ago, you son of a bitch!"

Tonks now changed her aim as Sirius' frantic scrambling at Remus' hands grew weaker. "Stupefy." Remus still kept going and so Tonks put more power behind her spell. "Stupefy."

This time Remus slumped forward and Tonks then aimed her wand at Sirius, who was coughing and sucking in air. "Incarcerous." She

then repeated the spell on Remus as well as applying a temporary field dressing on his bleeding shoulder, before rushing over to Harry. "Arresto Minuo."

After glancing in both bedrooms and not finding Dudley, Tonks set off at a run for the infirmary, aware that Harry needed blood replenishing potions and as quickly as possible.

Remus came round a few moments later, the spell having quickly worn off him, only to discover he was tied up with rope. Using his lupine strength, he managed to break free from the rope around his arms and he quickly tugged off the remaining ropes holding him. After checking on Harry, and hoping that Tonks had used her commonsense, he did the same as Tonks had and checked for Dudley, before hurrying back to Harry's side. Remus glared at Sirius, every instinct in him screaming at him to kill him, particularly when Sirius asked after Harry in a hoarse voice.

"Will he live?"

Remus made himself remain where he was. "He's not fucking breathing and if he doesn't make it, I swear, Black, I will rip out your heart with my bare hands."

"I didn't want to do it, Remus."

"Just fucking save it!" Remus snarled. "Because if you don't, I can't answer for what I'll do."

At that moment, Tonks ran in, surprise on her face as she took in Remus holding Harry. "How did you get out?"

"Does it matter?" Remus snapped as he held out his hand. "Have you got blood replenishing potions?"

"Of course," Tonks said, holding up four vials.

"Is he going to make it?" Sirius asked, still concerned about his godson.

Remus turned in anger and, afraid of what Remus might do, Tonks aimed her wand at her cousin. "Stupefy."

With Sirius out of the picture, Remus turned back to Harry and, after picking up his wand from the floor and clearing Harry's airways of blood, he gave Tonks instructions. "I'll massage his throat and you can feed him the potion. Then we can try and get his heart going again."

Tonks slowly poured the potion into Harry's mouth. "Madam Pomfrey will be here shortly."

"I'm glad to hear it," Remus said as Tonks poured the second vial in and he began massaging Harry's throat again. Having decided that there was now enough blood replenishing potion inside of Harry to sustain him, Remus placed his wand on Harry's chest, barking out the spell he knew might save him. "Revivio."

On Remus' third attempt, Harry jolted upright, gasped in air and opened his eyes but he was still rather woozy.

Tonks let out a sigh of relief. "Thank Merlin." She then passed Remus a third vial. "Here."

As Remus administered the third vial, Harry able to swallow himself, Tonks looked across at Remus. "You do realize that I'm going to have to report what you did."

Remus shrugged. "The bastard deserved to die."

"Not by your hand," Tonks said, uncorking the fourth vial.

"He killed my friends and I can't think of anyone better to kill him," Remus said angrily. "Except maybe Harry."

"You probably know as well as I do that Black is a brilliant dueler. I'm a fully trained Auror and he wiped the floor with me," Tonks said, as Remus tipped the contents of the final vial into Harry's mouth. "Harry didn't stand a chance against him."

"I tried," Harry said softly, and it was obvious from the strain in his voice he was in pain.

"I know you did," Remus said, and he felt horribly guilty. "I should never have asked you to stay with Dudley." He then addressed

Tonks. "I have both sleeping and pain potions in the cabinet in my bathroom."

"Did you actually believe that Sirius would come in here and try to kill him?" Tonks asked, as she came back in guessing that Remus was feeling guilty.

"Of course not," Remus said as he fed the potions to Harry, who sighed and drifted off to sleep. "I just imagined it would be a simple babysitting job."

"And I can see from the two bodies outside of the door that there were Aurors charged with protecting the boy," Tonks told him. "Just as I know that there were Aurors outside of the gate to the school, myself included."

"And yet out of everyone he left you alive, although I have no idea why," Remus said, after applying a temporary field dressing to Harry's head, picking him up and placing him on the sofa.

Poppy chose that moment to come waddling in, Amelia Bones right behind her together with a contingent of Aurors, two of whom were the guards from outside of Remus' room, Sirius having only stunned them in order not to set off any alarms, although both Remus and Tonks hadn't stopped to check, believing them to be dead.

Poppy immediately began to tend to Harry, although she could already see that Remus had done enough to stabilize him and make him comfortable.

Amelia turned to Tonks. "Report."

Tonks outlined what she knew and Amelia turned to Remus.

"Remus Lupin, you are under arrest for the unauthorized use of an Unforgivable and for attempted murder. Anything you say can be used against you during your trial. After you have been treated for your injury, you will be remanded into custody until such trial can be arranged where you will be tried for these crimes. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Remus said, not bothering to offer up an argument.

Amelia barked out an order. "Remove Professor Lupin."

Remus let two of the Aurors place magical restraints on him and he was led out of the room.

Amelia aimed her wand at Sirius, who groaned and opened his eyes. His first thought was to apologize. "I'm sorry."

Amelia ignored the apology. "Did you kill Dudley Ellis?"

"I don't know." Sirius' answer, however, made it obvious that he tried. "He flooded out."

"Did you try to kill Harry Potter?"

"I'm sorry, I made an effort..."

Amelia interrupted him. "I don't want your excuses, Black; I just want to know whether you tried to kill Harry Potter or not."

"Yes," Sirius admitted, although he knew he was likely signing his own death warrant by doing so. "But..."

Given what had happened, Amelia was far from in the mood to listen to Sirius' excuses or his pleading, and she turned away from him to speak to Tonks. "Auror Tonks, would you bear witness to the fact that Sirius Black confessed to the attempted murders of Harry Potter and Dudley Ellis at – here she looked at the clock – 7.52 a.m.?"

Sirius gasped as he heard Tonks' name, now understanding why he thought he had recognized her. "You're Andy's daughter?"

"Yes," Tonks said, barely able to take her eyes off a man her mother had once said she had believed was one of the most loyal followers of the Light she knew. She asked the same question Remus had a few moments earlier. "But what I don't understand is why you simply didn't kill me? You obviously didn't know who I was until now. Why use a sleeping spell?"

Amelia thought she knew. "He obviously needed you to get in and he was afraid of setting the wards off. I think that's why the guards outside of this room survived."

"But he could have left me on the grounds to the Dementors," Tonks pointed out. "But he didn't. Why did you leave me alive?"

"I had no reason to kill you," Sirius answered, unable to say more.

"And what about Harry Potter?" Amelia interrupted. "He was your godson."

"I didn't want to hurt him," Sirius said, his voice heavy with guilt. "But he refused to listen to me."

Amelia was disgusted. "Tonks, please arrest him formally."

Tonks gladly did so. "Sirius Orion Black, you are under arrest for the attempted murder of Dudley Ellis and Harry Potter. You are also under arrest for the murders of Emily Robirch, Tamsin Dunst, Robert Halliwell, Keith Right and Matthew Gladwing. I am therefore remanding you into custody until a trial can be arranged where you will be tried for these crimes. Do you understand?"

Sirius nodded. "Yes."

Amelia knew that with Sirius' confession about trying to kill Harry, a trial wouldn't be necessary, but Tonks had a procedure to follow. When Tonks had finished speaking, Amelia vanished the ropes from Sirius' upper body, allowing one of the Aurors to fit Sirius with magical handcuffs, before she also vanished the ropes on Sirius' lower half. Sirius was then frog-marched out.

When Harry came to again, he discovered he was in a private room in the infirmary and Amelia Bones was sitting next to him. "Dudley?"

Amelia was able to pass on good news. "He's shook up but alive, Harry."

Harry closed his eyes in relief. Although he didn't like his cousin, he was glad to hear that he wasn't dead. "Thank you."

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Harry sat up and reached out to take some water, ignoring the question. "I thought Remus or Aunt Molly would be here."

"Mrs. Weasley came by earlier but we assured her that you're doing just fine," Amelia said, avoiding mentioning Remus, with whom she knew that Harry had a very good relationship.

Harry, however, was not about to let her off the hook. "And Remus?"

"He's in Azkaban," Amelia said, well aware that what she had to tell Harry would not go down well. "He tried to deliberately murder Sirius Black and so I had no choice but to arrest him. And given that I have no idea what happened between you and Black, as Black will only tell me that he tried to kill you and your cousin, I need to see your memory of what happened."

"Black won't tell you what I did?"

Amelia shook her head. "He said that his confession should be enough and that I should leave you alone to recover."

Harry was a little shocked as he realized that, for some bizarre reason, Sirius was trying to protect him by not telling Amelia about the curses Harry had used. "I know it sounds mad but I think he's trying to shield me."

"Why would he do that?"

Given that Amelia was going to see what happened anyway, Harry made a clean breast of things. "I don't know. But I think it's because I tried to kill him."

"How?" Amelia asked, hoping that Harry had not gone as far as Remus.

"I knew he was going to beat me, so I used the Killing Curse before he did," Harry said, not bothering to lie.

"Then it was in self-defense?" Amelia asked.

Harry nodded, as this was the truth. "Yes."

Amelia was rather relieved. "Very well. After I've seen your memory of the event, I'll be able to ensure that you aren't charged."

It was over an hour later when Amelia returned and by now Harry was rather worried. "Are you going to charge me?"

"I need to ask you a few questions first before I make any decision," Amelia said, sitting down at Harry's bedside. "The spells you first used on Black weren't fourth year spells, in fact they're almost borderline Dark Magic. Would you care to tell me where you learned them?"

"I can't," Harry said quietly.

"Then I have no choice," Amelia told him and she withdrew Veritaserum. "I've already received permission from Molly Weasley to administer this."

Harry knew why Molly would have said yes – unlike Arthur, although she knew what Remus was, she had no idea about what Remus was teaching him, both men well aware that she would never have allowed it, but both men believing it to be in Harry's best interests. "I still won't be able to tell you."

Amelia frowned but she made a demand of Harry. "Stick out your tongue."

As Harry stuck out his tongue, Amelia administered the drug and then she began to question him. "Who taught you those spells?"

Harry began to sweat as his oath to Remus warred with the truth drug. "I can't..."

"Fine, you don't have to answer that question," Amelia snapped, aware that Harry must have sworn some sort of oath, although she had suspected it would be the case from the moment Harry had said he wouldn't be able to tell her the truth. "I now know that you can cast the Killing Curse with ease, so it's obvious you've been practicing. Have you?"

Harry had little choice to admit he had. "Yes."

Amelia pressed on. "And did you deliberately use the Killing Curse against Black when you could have used a different spell?"

"No," Harry said immediately. "I thought I was going to die if I didn't."

"Did you already know any of these spells before you came to BritAD for your initial training?"

"No."

Amelia wondered when Harry had learnt them. "How about the second time?"

"Yes."

"Did you really need any of the training you received at BritAD the second time?" Amelia asked, wondering if Harry had been wasting her time.

"Some," Harry said honestly.

"And now?"

"Not really," Harry told her, able to see how angry she was.

Amelia administered the antidote, having only received permission to question Harry about the spells he had used, her questions already stretching Molly's proviso for administering the Veritaserum. "I'm afraid that I have little choice but to charge you with the repeated use of an Unforgivable Curse. Once you have recovered, you will be formally arrested and taken to Azkaban to await trial. In the meantime you will remain locked in this room and will not be allowed visitors except for medical and Auror personnel. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Harry said in a steady voice, although inside he was quaking at the thought of having to spend time in Azkaban.

After giving instructions to Poppy about Harry's incarceration, Amelia returned to BritAD with a heavy heart. She truly did like Harry but his actions had left her smarting, especially given what she believed she had done for him. Her mood was not helped when, after glancing down at her desk, she noticed an urgent communiqué, which she opened. "Ignotus!"

The Next Morning

Ignotus greeted Amelia politely as he walked into her office. "Good morning, Madam Bones. As you obviously didn't receive my message, I thought I'd come and see you."

"Ignotus," Amelia said stiffly, having ignored Ignotus' letter. "I suppose you want to speak to me about Potter?"

"Actually no. It's about Remus Lupin - you're to drop all charges and release him," Ignotus demanded, although he was aware that he was likely going to have to blow Remus' cover in order to be able to free him from Azkaban.

Amelia snorted. "I will do no such thing."

"He's an Unspeakable, Amelia," Ignotus revealed, showing her Remus' papers. "And Harry Potter's bodyguard."

Amelia's lip pursed together as she saw that Remus was indeed an Unspeakable. "So that's where Harry learnt how to cast so many borderline Dark Arts spells and the Killing Curse."

Ignotus knew that Amelia had questioned Harry, even though she had tried to keep things quiet. However, he had fingers in more pies than she knew about. "So what if he did?"

"Harry used the Killing Curse in a duel against Black, Harry choosing to use it first. And it was also more than a little obvious from the ease with which he used the Curse that he has used it before, something he admitted to, and so tomorrow I will be charging him with the unauthorized use of an Unforgivable, and unlike your boy Lupin, he doesn't have your protection," Amelia ranted, taking her anger and disappointment out on Ignotus. "And..."

"I'm afraid you're quite wrong, Amelia. You see, Harry has exactly the same protection that Remus does," Ignotus interrupted, taking some pleasure from the furious look on Amelia's face, there being no love lost between either of them.

"I need to see proof," Amelia demanded, scarcely able to believe that Harry was an Unspeakable.

Ignotus left his the office before returning to showed her the paperwork pertaining to Harry. "As usual, under your oath, this will

remain between us. You will, of course, hand over any copies of any memories you have taken from Auror Tonks, Sirius Black, Remus or Harry pertaining to this event that may incriminate either Harry or Remus. I will, of course, be dealing with the removal of any pertinent memories from the staff of Hogwarts. And I believe it would be in Auror Tonks' best interests if she was to pay me a visit."

Amelia had no choice but to agree. However, she did give Ignotus a warning. "Fine, but if you or Lupin ever dare to ever piss in my pool again, I swear I'll make you both sorry that you ever joined the bloody Unspeakables."

Ignotus smiled inside of his hood, aware that this was an empty threat. "I'll piss wherever I choose to, as will Remus and, of course, Harry."

"And you can tell Potter that he's no longer welcome at BritAD," Amelia said in frustration, well aware that Ignotus could literally do almost anything he wanted. "He's wasted my time and that of my Aurors."

Ignotus was completely unfazed by Amelia's anger. "It was necessary for appearances sake."

This just angered Amelia all the more. "I don't give a shit. He's no longer welcome. And I'd revoke his Level One Clearance but I suspect that would be a waste of time, wouldn't it?"

Ignotus smiled, although he knew Amelia would be unable to see that under his hood. "I suppose it would and now that this meeting is concluded, I do believe that I would like Remus released from Azkaban." He then turned and left.

Amelia picked up her in-tray and threw it across the room, letting her anger spill over. "Sanctimonious arsehole!" She then vanished from her room, having little choice but to arrange for Remus' immediate release.

Three Hours Later

A tired Remus stood facing his boss, worry over Harry meaning that he had gotten little sleep in Azkaban, even though he had not been

held in a high security area and therefore not exposed to the Dementors. "I'm in deep shit, aren't I?"

"You let your personal feelings dictate your actions, Remus," Ignotus said, his voice heavily with disappointment. "And given that this is the second time this year I've found it necessary to bring you up on disciplinary action, I would normally suspend you from duty but I need you in Hogwarts. Instead I'm going to demote you from your current position back to Unspeakable First Class, dock three months' wages and warn you that if anything like this happens again, you will be left to face the consequences."

"I understand, Sir," Remus acknowledged, but his punishment was the least of his concerns. He was more worried about the two boys who had been attacked. "What about Harry and Dudley?"

"Dudley is safe and I'm going to see Harry this afternoon." Ignotus stood up. "That's all."

Remus left, aware that although he and Ignotus had a very good relationship, he had been very lucky not to be left to rot in Azkaban.

Harry put down his book as a cloaked man came in. He knew he was too thin to be Remus and he suspected it might be Ignotus. "Can I help you?"

Ignotus closed the door. "You can, Harry. It's Ignotus."

Harry almost unconsciously straightened up and he paled as his fears were confirmed. "Good afternoon, Sir."

"Do you know why I'm here?"

Harry hazarded a guess. "To take me to Azkaban?"

Ignotus shook his head. "No, no charges have been filed against you, although to get those charges dropped I'm afraid that I've had to reveal to Bones about your status as an Unspeakable."

"I'm sorry."

"It isn't your fault, Harry," Ignotus said gently, not wanting Harry to blame himself for something he had been unable to prevent. "After seeing your memory of taking on Black, I believe you were lucky to survive and, contrary to what Bones might believe, your use of those curses were necessary so don't let yourself think otherwise."

"I won't, Sir," Harry said, feeling a sense of relief that Ignotus had approved of what he had done.

Ignotus moved on. "Now tell me, how are you feeling?"

"Sore and itchy," Harry admitted, still aching despite the potions he had been given. "Black made a bit of a mess of me, but I should be up by tomorrow." He then asked after his mentor. "Is Remus okay?"

"Remus has been released from custody and will no doubt drop by later to see you," Ignotus said, before he passed on Amelia's words. "Speaking of Remus, you should know that we've all pissed off Bones in a big way. I'm afraid you're no longer welcome at BritAD and, I suspect, her home, although she didn't say that."

Harry winced. "I wonder if Susan will still want to be my friend."

"That is between you and her," Ignotus said, and then he moved on to the subject of Sirius. "I should tell you that Sirius Black won't be receiving a trial since he confessed to your attempted murder, and so his execution is due to take place in a week's time."

Harry's face tightened with hatred. "Good. Is he getting the Kiss?"

Ignotus also noticed Harry's hands reflexively grip his bedding. "Yes."

"I want to be there," Harry demanded, his knuckles turning white as his grip grew even tighter.

Noting Harry's reaction, Ignotus refused his request. "I don't believe it would be to your benefit, Harry."

"I don't care," Harry argued. "I want to see that man die. He killed my girlfriend's mother, my best friend's father, my relatives, my family, countless others, and..."

Ignotus held up his hand. "I get your point but I'm also well aware that your previous witnessing of such an event traumatized you badly enough to have to be obliviated afterwards."

"I'm not eleven anymore," Harry pointed out. "And look at what I've done since then."

"Are you talking about nearly killing Black or the Death Eater you killed?"

"Both."

Ignotus sighed at Harry's implacable face. "Very well. Just promise me though that you'll think carefully before you make the final decision to watch Black's death."

"I promise," Harry said, although he had every intention of watching Sirius go the same way he knew his aunt had.

Ignotus stood up. "I hope I don't see you there, but I have the feeling I will. Take care, Harry."

"I will, Sir," Harry said, and he lay back against his pillows as the door closed, his mind on Sirius Black and his upcoming execution.

Next Chapter: Harry discovers that not everything is as black and white as it seems.

Chapter 46: The Death Sentence

The snowy white owl sitting in the tree closest to the gates to Hogwarts watched as Severus Snape left the school before disappearing as soon as he was shielded by trees.

The previous day the same owl had sat in the same tree and watched as first Remus Lupin, and then Sirius Black, had been led out of the school by an armed guard before they had vanished. It hadn't stirred when, less than twenty minutes later, it had also watched the Potions Master make his way to the same gate before heading into the woods and vanishing, just as he had today.

Deciding it had better do something other than simply watching and, aware that time was running out, the owl flew down towards Hagrid's hut.

Hagrid immediately spotted the bird and as it landed on his arm, he scratched its breast. "I suppose you want a snack, don't you?"

The owl bumped her head against Hagrid, and smiling, he opened the door, the owl flying from his arm into his hut and landing on his bed.

Almost immediately, Nagini began frantically hissing and so Hagrid headed over to her cage. "Now wha' is up with you?"

Nagini hissed several times, trying to make herself understood. Harry had warned Hagrid about Nagini's jealousy of Hedwig and Hagrid wagged a large finger at the snake. "She won't harm you, you daft girl. Now will you, Hedwig?"

As he finished speaking, Hagrid turned just in time to see the owl disintegrating. Horrified he started to move over towards his bed, ignoring Nagini's worsening hissing. At that moment a mist glided behind him and dove into the cage, Nagini going silent for one moment before the frenzied hissing continued afresh.

Now concerned for Nagini after the owl's strange demise, Hagrid decided to free her from her cage and take her out of his hut. Having missed the merging of snake and mist, when he opened the cage he was taken unawares and Nagini struck out at him, pumping large amounts of venom into him. Grabbing his hand, Hagrid staggered

backwards while the snake fled out of the cage and through the still open door.

Hogwarts Infirmary

Having been released a day early on the promise he would return to Ravenclaw and stay in bed, Harry was just leaving his room when he was horrified to see Remus and a burly seventh year Ravenclaw, David Berry, bearing Hagrid into the hospital. "What happened to him?"

"Nagini bit him," Remus said, before he turned to Madam Pomfrey. "He's been bitten by Harry's snake and judging by his color and breathing, I'd say it's going to be fatal if he doesn't receive an antivenin."

"I don't have any," Poppy said worriedly. "Professor Snape will have to brew some."

"I just saw him leaving the school, Ma'am," Berry informed her. "Not long before I found Hagrid lying on the ground."

Harry interrupted. "Hermione could brew it I expect."

"I'll contact St. Mungo's," Poppy said. "But it isn't exactly something I expect them to have on their shelves."

Deciding to cover both options, while Poppy floored the hospital, Remus set off at a run to try and track down Hermione. He found her at his first port of call, the library. "I need you to brew an antivenin for a snake bite, Hermione."

Hermione jumped to her feet immediately, the urgency in Remus' tone making it evident that this was a matter that couldn't wait. She headed into the back of the library and quickly withdrew a potions book that she hoped would have what she needed. She rapidly scanned the index and discovered the book did before turning to the page and reading the instructions. "It should only take about ten minutes but I've never done it before although it seems quite straightforward. Why don't you contact St. Mungo's?"

"Madam Pomfrey is, but she's doubtful they'll have antivenin because snake bites rarely happen," Remus said as he followed Hermione towards the dungeons. "We need to run."

"Go ahead and set up a gold cauldron with two pints of distilled water so that it's boiling," Hermione instructed Remus, aware she wouldn't be able to keep up with him.

The water was already boiling when Hermione arrived and she deftly began to assemble what she needed, calling upon Remus when she needed help. "Get fairy wings for me." She then stirred the potion counterclockwise twice before adding two wings and then finally some optional ginger root to stop nausea, a side effect of the potion if the item was missed out. "We just need to wait for one minute and then stir clockwise three times for it to be done." She glanced at Remus as she waited. "Who's been bitten?"

"Hagrid," Remus told her, keeping an eye on the time. "Nagini did it."

"That's going to upset Harry," Hermione said, noting that she had fifteen seconds left. "Can you get me a vial, please?"

Remus passed Hermione the vial as she began to stir the potion. She then ladled it into the vial and corked it. "You'd better take it. I'll follow."

By the time Hermione reached the hospital wing, a still somewhat pale Hagrid was already sitting up and he gave her a huge smile. "Thanks."

Filius Flitwick, who had by now joined everyone in the hospital, sat on the edge of the reinforced bed. "What happened?"

Hagrid gave Harry a sorrowful look as he began. "I went into the hut to fetch Hedwig a snack and Nagini began hissing like mad, she did. I told 'er not to so daft and turned back to talk to Hedwig but she was gone; she was just a pile of ashes. So I decided to get Nagini out but when I opened 'er cage, she bit me and fled. I'm really sorry, Harry."

By now Harry understood the sorrowful look Hagrid had given him. "Do you know what killed Hedwig?"

Hagrid shook his head. "No, she was alive one minute and gone the next."

Filius spoke to Remus. "Would you mind taking a look?"

"I'll go now."

"I'm coming with you," Harry said, ignoring Madam Pomfrey's annoyed look.

Hermione also tagged along and when they reached the hut, they found Nagini's cage empty and the owl sized pile of ashes.

Having seen various memories of Quirrell's attack on Harry on the Hogwarts' Express, Remus made an observation. "It almost looks like when Quirrell died on the train and all that were left were the ashes rather than a body."

Hermione jumped to an obvious but only partially correct conclusion. "Voldemort must have been hiding inside of Hedwig, just as he did with Quirrell, before he went into Nagini, and I bet he had something to do with Black."

"At least he's safely locked away," Harry said.

"He might be but Nagini isn't," Remus remarked, before casting a spell and putting as much power into it as he could. "Accio Nagini."

Nothing happened. Harry also tried before the trio headed outside, copying their actions, but again to no avail. Going back inside of the hut, Harry looked down at the pile of ashes. "I need to bury her."

And so, with Remus' help, Harry buried Hedwig's ashes before saying a Muggle prayer and then heading back up to the school.

Laurifer Manor

Completely unaware of what was happening at Hogwarts, Severus was currently seated before Tom, this being the first chance he had to speak to the man since his brief report the previous day when he had informed him about Sirius' and Remus' arrests.

"So what news to do you have for me today?"

Severus took a mouthful of the wine that a house-elf had served him before answering, "The Dursley boy survived Black's attack."

"A pity but I won't be wasting any more time going after him," Tom said. "He's served his purpose. Have you found out yet why Lupin was arrested?"

"No, but I imagine he probably attacked Black," Severus said, before going on to reveal some slightly more interesting news. "However, I did spot Bones heading for the hospital wing yesterday and so I decided to try and use my Animagus form to eavesdrop. It's how I found about the Dursley boy surviving."

"And...?"

"It turns out that Potter isn't quite as pure as the driven snow as he'd like everyone to believe," Severus said. "He used borderline Dark Arts spells on Black as well as the Killing Curse, although evidently he failed."

This surprised Tom immensely. "I wouldn't have thought him capable but where would he have learnt such spells? From Lupin or the Weasleys perhaps?"

Severus snorted. "The Weasleys don't have it in them, and, while he might have attacked Black in anger, Lupin is too much of a goody two shoes to even think of writing down a Dark Arts spell let alone teaching something like that to Potter."

"Then from whom do you think he learnt it?"

"I know from one of my contacts in the Ministry that he's good friends with several Aurors there, including Nymphadora Tonks, a relative of Black's but unlike him she's Light-sided, and Annabelle Jameson, a newly qualified Auror who used to be in Hufflepuff."

"Is Jameson from a Dark Family?"

Severus nodded, realizing that Tom had no idea of Anna's background. "She has a half-sister, Johanna Jameson, whose mother is, or should I say was, Selena Gregory."

Tom let out a hiss of shock. "So that would certainly explain where Potter has picked up his illegal lessons. Do you think either woman would be worth approaching?"

"If Annabelle is teaching Potter to defend himself, I doubt she'd consider it," Severus mused. "And I have no idea about her sister's allegiances as she never attended Hogwarts and so I can't say for certain about her."

The mention of Johanna's mother led Tom to ask about a possibility that occurred to him. "Is there any chance this Johanna could be Voldemort's daughter?"

Severus shook his head. "Reddington Malfoy vanished at the same time as Selena Gregory was murdered, and the rumors are that Johanna was Malfoy's daughter and that Lord Voldemort killed both him and Selena when he discovered them in bed together, although Jameson obviously still kept the child after her mother's death. I can only assume that either the Malfoys didn't want her as she was illegitimate and not a child of the Malfoy heir or the child was actually Jameson's daughter."

"Something you missed telling me before," Tom pointed out, more than a little annoyed at Severus for failing to do so, although he could have said the same about Lucius.

"I can only apologize as I didn't realize it was important," Severus said, hoping that Tom was not going to punish him.

"I suppose it's not," Tom said, before returning back to the matter at hand. "So how did Bones take the news about Potter's slide into our territory?"

Taken slightly aback at the change in subject, but relieved that Tom had made it, Severus took another sip of his wine before responding, a smirk on his face. "He was placed under house arrest until he can be taken to Azkaban and tried for using an Unforgivable." Having been unaware of Ignotus' visit, Severus had no idea that Harry had, in fact, been released nor that Remus had also been similarly blessed, Severus having left the school moments before Remus had arrived back just in time to help Berry with Hagrid.

Tom's smile now matched Severus' own. "That is good news." He rose up. "I want you to monitor the situation and report back tomorrow."

Severus was not exactly happy about this, but was thankful that the weather was unseasonably nice or he imagined he would freeze to death if he had to hang around outside of Harry's window, even for the short period of time he would have available to him. "Of course, but I may not be able to find out much and it may be late when I finally manage to get here as it's a school day."

"That's fine. You may go."

Severus put down his half finished wine and left.

The Next Night

Although he was angry that Severus had not turned up at all, Tom pushed his anger aside as he headed for his bed and pulled back the sheets. He still so relished the feel and odor of the crisp cotton against his skin after so long in the diary, but his journey into sleep was to be interrupted when a hissing voice called out his name. Tom turned around and demanded in Parseltongue, "Show yourself!"

A large green hued snake slithered into sight. "It's been a long time since I gazed upon that face."

Tom automatically reached up and touched his cheek. "I beg your pardon."

"You don't recognize me, do you?" the snake hissed, making it almost sound like a laugh. "I'm you, Tom."

"Lord Voldemort?" Tom asked, but he failed to mask his disbelief as he did so.

"Yes," the snake confirmed.

Tom wondered how Voldemort had tracked him down. "How did you find me?"

"Snape," Voldemort said simply.

Tom was furious at the news. "Snape brought you here?"

"Of course not willingly," Voldemort responded disparagingly. "Snape is a traitorous bastard who only thinks of saving his own skin."

"I don't understand," Tom said.

"He killed Bella," Voldemort hissed. "I knew then that he had turned and so I began to take over rodent bodies, watching him. Then I eventually took over an owl and tried to follow Snape a few days ago, but was unable to do so. So I decided a different approach would be needed and, after leaving the owl, I took over the body of this beauty and followed Snape here."

"Exactly how did you manage it?" Tom asked, intrigued as to how a snake would have served Voldemort any better than an owl, even though it obviously had.

"I sank my fangs into Snape's ankle just as he disappeared," Voldemort explained, his hissing angry. "I knew from spying on him as an owl exactly where he left from and so I lay in wait for him."

"And where is Snape now?" Tom asked, wondering why his most trusted servant had not come to tell him what had transpired, particularly as Voldemort had confirmed that Snape had led Voldemort to Tom unwillingly.

"Hogwarts I expect. I pumped enough venom into him to kill him," Voldemort hissed in delight.

Tom shrugged. "I suppose I can always find another Potions Master."

The snake made a very strange sound, almost like a chortle, before getting down to business. "Do you know why I'm here?"

"So that we can be merged," Tom guessed, and then he lied. "I've had people out looking for you for just that reason, but they failed to discover any trace of you."

"Bella sheltered me," Voldemort hissed. "She then sacrificed part of herself to try to bring me back. But the ritual failed, and so, as you

correctly guessed, I have decided that we will need to merge instead."

Tom felt nauseated at the very idea, but he showed none of this on his face. "I'm afraid I need to look up the correct ritual for our merger."

"I know the ritual already," Voldemort informed him. "You will need to brew the soul merging potion, although I doubt you will be familiar with it."

Tom had read about it, more than aware that one day Voldemort might well seek him out. "Commisceo Animus." He then lied. "But I don't know how to make it."

"Then I will tell you what you will need and how to make it. Do you have a potions lab here?" Voldemort hissed, also having looked up the potion in detail and committed it to memory.

"A very basic one," Tom said, lying once more.

"That will suffice," Voldemort decided, before stating, "The potion will take you one day to brew."

"Then I will start in the morning." Tom fully intended to get a good night's sleep.

"You will start now," Voldemort ordered.

Tom wished he could simply destroy the snake but he was well aware that Voldemort would revert to his misty state, and Tom would then have no idea of where the man was or what he was up to. "Very well, I'll start on it now."

After giving Tom instructions on how to brew the potion, Voldemort slithered over to the fireplace. "A fire would be welcome before you leave."

Tom aimed his wand at the fireplace, which was how he guessed Voldemort had managed to gain access into his room. "I will see you later."

"You will return in one hour." Voldemort lifted his head for a moment, looking directly at Tom, before coiling up.

After walking into the large and spacious potions lab in the basement, Tom discovered that Severus was not in Hogwarts, but had sensibly headed for Tom's own private lab and was now brewing frantically. Tom headed over to him. "You've been bitten, haven't you?"

Severus was already feeling dizzy and acknowledged he had. "Potter's snake sank its fangs into me just as I was disapparating. I tried to kill it when I arrived but Lucius was in the way. It slithered off somewhere. Lucius is searching for it." Severus wobbled as he added fairy wings, the venom effectively doing its job.

Tom pushed him aside and placed the book he had in his hand on the side. "I will finish this."

Sweating, and getting more disorientated by the second, Severus let Tom finish the potion and, a short time later, after taking it, he started to feel like himself again. "Thank you, Tom."

"You are more than welcome, Severus," Tom said, and then he let him in on a secret. "Lucius won't find the snake; it's in my rooms."

"You killed it?" Severus asked.

Tom shook his head. "I didn't dare take the chance. You see, the snake is Voldemort, and he knows you killed Lestrage and that you're a traitor, Severus. And the reason he bit you was to kill you and because he hoped that you would bring him to me."

"And I did exactly that," Severus said resignedly. "My humblest apologies."

"On reflection you may have done me a favor," Tom informed Severus, who he knew had expected to be punished. "Voldemort wants me to make the Commisceo Animus potion."

Aware of what the potion did, and although he was surprised that Tom seemed to want to go ahead with the merger, Severus immediately offered to make it. "I am almost completely recovered now and would be happy to brew it for you."

Tom shook his head. "I'm not going to merge with that thing. I'm going to make the Laqueum Animus potion instead."

Also aware of this potion's abilities, Severus guessed at what Tom had planned. "You're going to trap Lord Voldemort's soul somehow?"

Tom smiled in acknowledgement. "I thought in that book would be most fitting. I'd ask you to make the potion but you would be betraying your former master if you did so."

As part of Voldemort's former Inner Circle, Severus' oath was far more reaching than a standard Death Eater's oath, and he was well aware that if he betrayed Voldemort by making the potion for Tom, it might kill him. However, he still felt obliged to offer his services. "But as you are part of him, I'd still be serving you, or at least I think I would."

"I don't want to lose my Potions Master, so I do believe that we shouldn't take the chance, Severus," Tom said as he began to move swiftly around the potions lab putting together what he needed. An hour later he straightened up. "I have to return."

When Tom entered the bedroom, the snake glanced at the gold clock on the mantelpiece. "You are at stage one. What color is the potion?"

Tom relayed what he knew Voldemort expected to hear. "An opaque silvery-blue with silvery flecks."

"Excellent!" Voldemort hissed. "Soon I will take my revenge on Potter, something I know you have so far failed to do."

"You obviously know that I tried during the Triwizard Tournament," Tom said, his voice tight, although he still had no idea how Harry had been able to avoid him at the graveyard.

"I do," Voldemort acknowledged, having been able to overhear the panicked conversation between the teachers as he had hidden in rat form beneath the bleachers. "And given that I know that the boy is still alive, I do believe my statement about your failure is correct."

Tom didn't like the gloating hiss that came out of Voldemort's mouth and he therefore brought up Voldemort's own disappointment. "I could say the same about failure to you, especially as you also tried to kill Potter and didn't succeed, thanks to his mother, I believe."

"Lily Potter!" Voldemort's hissing was full of anger, both at Lily's actions and Tom's remark. "Stupid girl! She should have stood aside, leaving me to ascend to my destiny."

Tom decided his creator was full of pride; a path he didn't intend to take, fully intending to learn from Voldemort's mistakes. "Why would you even let her live? Severus said it was because he had been a loyal servant."

"Up until then he had been, and I therefore agreed that if the Mudblood didn't offer up any resistance, then she could live." Even though he had done so, Voldemort had never understood Severus' obsession with the redhead, particularly as she had been a Mudblood, albeit a brilliantly talented one. "I should have just stunned her."

"So was it painful?" Tom asked, when a silence fell, as this was something Severus had been unable to tell him.

"Yes!" Voldemort hissed, nodding his head, his scales glistening in the firelight. "Every part of my body felt as though it was being torn apart. I existed in the world by taking over small animals' bodies but they didn't last long. Eventually I took over a teacher, feeding off his life force to survive. Then he was destroyed and after his death, Bella found me and she nursed me until I was strong enough to undergo a ritual to restore me into a true body. Unfortunately the ritual went wrong. I suspect now that Snape deliberately didn't follow my instructions, something I intend to see that you do." Voldemort pinned his gaze on Tom. "I want to see the potion."

"Of course," Tom said, guessing correctly that Voldemort didn't entirely trust him. Leading the way down the stairs, Tom let Voldemort follow him, before opening the door to his potions lab. As the snake slithered in front of him, Tom stunned it.

When Voldemort came to, it was to find himself trapped in a cage, both Tom and Severus watching him. "What is the meaning of this?"

Tom placed a book next to the cage. "Did you really think that I'd merge with you?"

"You are weak without me," Voldemort pointed out. "You're only a piece of my soul and should you die then it is final."

"Rather that than merge with you," Tom said, his voice revealing his disgust. "How we might look after such a merger repulses me."

"I only looked like that because of splitting my soul so many times," Voldemort hissed at Tom. "And if I had not done so, you would not be here."

"No, I would not," Tom admitted. "But I fully intend to make the most of the opportunity that has been given to me."

Voldemort tried bargaining with Tom. "I could help you achieve what you seek."

Tom had expected such a plea and he ignored it. "You can offer me nothing that would induce me to merge with you. Obviously I can't kill you, but I am going to make sure that you can give me no trouble."

Voldemort didn't betray his fear of what Tom might do, merely asking, "So you're going to put me on ice?"

"Not exactly how I'd have phrased it, but yes," Tom said, picking up the leather bound book he had fetched from his library and showing it to Voldemort. "This will be your new home. I thought it quite apt."

As he read the title, despite his predicament, Voldemort could not help but be amused by Tom's irony. "The Lair of the White Worm. Quite droll."

"I thought so." Tom picked up a vial of potion and threw its contents into the cage. "This will separate you from the snake."

Inside Nagini, Voldemort steeled himself as he was ripped forcibly from his vessel and he reverted back to his gaseous form. Trying to flee through the bars of the cage, he found himself unable to do so and he was forced to listen as Tom picked up a second vial of potion.

"This potion will imbue the book with absorptive qualities. When I slide it in through the bars, your essence will be drawn inside." Tom poured the potion over the book, watching as the book glowed pink before resuming its original brown color. "Then I am going to place this book in the library here in Laurifer Manor."

Voldemort felt himself being sucked into the book as it was placed inside the cage. Within moments it was over and he was bound inside. He soon began to feel sleepy and, just as Tom had slept in a dormant fashion in the diary without any life force to feed him, Voldemort too would eventually reach the same state.

Severus let out a sigh of relief. "I have to be honest, I was half afraid it would fail."

"Voldemort is not going to be a bother to either of us ever again, a little like Black," Tom said. "So what news on Potter?"

"When I returned he had been released and Lupin was back as well," Severus said, disgust filling his voice. "I couldn't return here sooner as I had to attend a meeting to discuss what had happened to Hagrid - Nagini bit him. Flitwick suspects it was Lord Voldemort and that somehow he had been in cahoots with Black."

Tom grinned. "That's even better. I'm quite sure that such evidence makes Black's plea of innocence even more damning."

Severus grinned back. "And it's another stake in Potter's heart as well. He was rather upset from what I can gather about both Nagini and his owl."

Almost as if she had heard her name, Nagini gave a faint hiss, causing both men to look towards the large cage. Tom walked over. "I didn't think she'd survive."

"Are you going to kill her?"

Tom shook his head. "No." He then hissed at the snake, "I can you help you."

Severus was surprised when Tom gently fed the snake a restorative potion before hissing at it, the snake weakly responding.

"What does it want?"

"To be protected from another attack like Voldemort's," Tom said, smirking. "I've told her if she agrees to bond to me, I'll protect her, unlike her former master."

"You're going to turn Potter's snake against him?"

Tom's smirk grew. "I do believe I am."

Severus also smirked. "Another blow for Potter then."

Tom again smiled before offering something up that he knew would make Severus even happier. "Before you leave, tell me, would you care to witness Black's death?"

"I imagined it would be a closed viewing," Severus responded.

"It is," Tom answered. "But Lucius will be there and he wondered if I wanted to accompany him, which of course would be rather difficult. However, I would be happy for you to attend in my place if you would care to do so."

Severus' eyes lit up almost greedily. "I would."

"Then perhaps you should contact Lucius to make arrangements." Tom picked up the book. "I'll let you see yourself out."

Tom whistled jauntily to himself as he made his way upstairs and into the library. Smiling, he slid the book back into the spot he had originally taken it from. He knew that none of the Death Eaters would ever want to read Muggle books, to say nothing of the fact that the library was his private domain. Voldemort would therefore remain in the book forever and, once he had the Hallows, he, Tom, would be the one to go on to rule the wizarding world.

2nd November 1996

Harry looked up at Remus as he came into the library. "Hi."

"We have to go," Remus said, before turning to Hermione. "Can you pack up Harry's things and leave them in my room?"

Hermione agreed, surprised at how quickly Remus hustled Harry out of the library.

Harry too was surprised. "Where are we going?"

"The execution has been brought forward to today," Remus said as he headed to his rooms. "We can floo out from my room as Filius has agreed to keep the floo open until I leave at the end of next year."

Harry didn't care so much about the floo – he was more interested in the change of date for the execution. "Why bring the execution forward?"

"I don't know, but I suspect it's to stop any rescue attempt," Remus said as he opened his door, before turning to face Harry. "Harry, if you don't want to go, then you can stay here. I didn't want to ask you in front of everyone."

"I'm going," Harry said firmly.

"Then leave your secondary wand here and let's go," Remus said. He then took Harry's arm and they stepped into the fireplace, before they disappeared in a flash of green smoke.

On arriving, Remus handed over his wand and Harry had to do the same. They were then led upstairs, passing numerous Aurors as they went along.

"There are a lot of Aurors around," Harry said, commenting on how many they had passed.

"I'm not surprised given Black's history," Remus remarked as they finally reached their destination.

On walking inside, Harry stiffened and whispered, "What's Snape doing here?"

"Come to gloat," Remus said, scowling at the man who was sitting with Lucius Malfoy. "He hates Black more than anyone else I know."

"I doubt it," Harry said, his voice full of hatred. "I think I can safely say I hate him more than Snape."

Remus sat Harry down next to Arthur Weasley, who he had also asked to attend just in case Harry needed more support. "Thanks for coming, Arthur. Do you know why there's been a change in date?"

Arthur shook his head. "No." He then greeted Harry. "Hello, Harry. Molly wanted to come to be with you but I told her no due to how bad I expect it might be. How are you holding up?"

"I feel sick," Harry admitted. "I just want it to be over."

"Another twenty minutes and you should get your wish," Remus said as he also sat down.

The twenty minutes seemed to take forever to go by but finally the time of the execution arrived and Sirius was led into the room.

Harry could not help but stare at the man who had destroyed his family and, to some extent, Harry's life.

Remus placed a hand on Harry's arm as Sirius was moved to stand in front of the archway. "Don't look if you don't want to, Harry."

"I have to," Harry said softly.

Both of them fell silent as Amelia asked if Sirius had anything to say before the execution was carried out.

Sirius did and he turned to face Harry. "Harry, I'm so sorry I hurt you but I didn't want to do it."

"Then why did you?" Harry asked, after struggling to find his voice, his nausea of earlier returning.

"I had no choice," Sirius responded.

"And what about my parents and my brother?" Harry yelled, anger overcoming his sickness. "Why did you betray them? Was it because you had no choice?"

Sirius' voice was full of anguish as he said, "I swear I didn't do it. It was Wormtail who betrayed them." He knew he hadn't gotten through to Harry when Harry looked away. So instead he turned his

attention to Remus. "Please, Moony," Sirius pleaded. "You have to believe me about Wormtail. He's the one who killed those Muggles, not me."

"Don't you dare denigrate a good man, Black!" Remus snarled, his face full of anger as he refuted his former friend's comment.

Sirius tried one more time. "Remus, please, I know I'm going to die for what I tried to do to Harry and for killing those people but honestly, I didn't give up James. If I had known what would happen, I would have been his secret keeper. Please, please, forgive me for not doing so."

Remus shook his head. "Go to hell, Black." He then deliberately looked away just as Harry had.

"I'm already there," Sirius murmured quietly before turning his gaze away from his former friend. Sirius had desperately wanted Remus to give him absolution for switching places with Wormtail but it was clear that despite his pleas, Remus hated him and absolution was the last thing on his mind. Sirius therefore turned back to face Amelia. "I'm ready."

Amelia placed a black piece of cloth over her shoulder and read out the death sentence. "Sirius Orion Black, you have been sentenced to the Dementor's Kiss for the murders of Vernon Dursley, Timothy Greer, Virginia Granger..."

The list went on for some time as Amelia named every single victim she believed that Sirius had killed, although he had not admitted to killing all of those on the list. "After this part of the sentence has been administered, your body will be cast through the Death Arch. May Merlin have mercy on your soul."

A pale and patently shaking Sirius was then led behind a screen by two of the contingent of Aurors that had been guarding him.

While the issuing of the decree was public, the actual moment of the Kiss and the sight of Sirius' body being cast through the arch would be hidden, as it was considered too horrific to watch, the law having been changed by Tiberius Ogden after Harry's adverse reaction to his aunt's execution. Ogden didn't want an entire room of people having to be obliviated, so only the Aurors who had volunteered

would remain behind the screen to act as witnesses while the Dementor did its work. They would then be the ones to carry out the final part of the execution.

Harry shivered as the Dementor glided in, its path taking it away from the spectators before it vanished behind the screen. His knuckles turned white as he grasped his trousers when he heard a horrible sucking noise before a flash came from behind the screen and the Dementor reappeared, before gliding away and being taken out. Then a minute later, the screen was lowered to reveal only the Aurors standing there.

Remus thought the Aurors didn't look so good and he glanced at Harry, who didn't look much better. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know," Harry said, his voice shaking. "I think I'd like some fresh air."

"Then I believe we should leave," Remus told him. "Let's go."

Following a couple of the other spectators out, Harry held onto Remus' arm until they were clear of the spinning room. Arthur then said his goodbyes after Harry reassured him that he would be okay, before Arthur headed off home to report to Molly on how things had gone.

Once they reached the departure area, Remus decided to side-apparate Harry and as they arrived just outside of Hogwarts, he held onto him as Harry leaned over and threw up. "I shouldn't have let you go."

"I wanted to go," Harry said when he was able to speak again.

Remus cast several spells on Harry to freshen his breath and clean him up. "Do you feel up to walking?"

Harry shook his head and burst into tears, crying uncontrollably for a few minutes, before angrily swiping at his tears and asking, "Why am I crying? I'm glad he's dead."

"I know but you're crying because it's how you always deal with stress once things have calmed down," Remus reminded him. "And it's okay."

It was then that it occurred to Harry that Remus too must be upset. "Are you all right? I'm sorry, I should have asked."

"I understand why you didn't, Harry, and no, I'm not all right," Remus admitted. "That was harder than I imagined it would be."

"Then perhaps you shouldn't have gone," Harry said, noticing that Remus appeared to be close to tears as well.

"Just like you, I had to," Remus said, before glancing up at the school. "Do you feel up to walking yet?"

"Yes," Harry said, the shaking in his legs having subsided a little.

"Then let's go to my rooms. I'm sure Hermione is probably waiting for us." Remus then opened the gate to the school and led Harry inside.

Next Chapter: Justin receives an unusual visitor; Remus visits a face from his past.

Chapter 47: Innocence Discovered

Justin was sitting at the back of the library looking out of the window, daydreaming instead of dealing with the small amount of homework he had to finish. Suddenly a rather skinny house-elf he didn't recognize appeared in front of him. "Does the Headmaster want to see me?"

"Are you Harry Potter's special friend?" the house-elf asked in a polite, but excitable voice.

Justin pulled out his wand as he realized the clothing most definitely wasn't the standard Hogwarts issue. "I'm his best friend, but who are you?"

"I mean you no harm," the house-elf said quickly, but not passing on his name. "I have important news."

"Tell me then," Justin demanded, still not lowering his wand.

"Sirius Black is innocent, friend of Harry Potter," the house-elf hurriedly told Justin.

"Pull the other one. He killed Aurors and then tried to kill Harry," Justin said, now more convinced than ever that this house-elf was a danger to Harry.

"He was forced to do it, Sir, by the bad man," the house-elf told him. "You have to help him. You have to stop the execution today."

"Why should I believe you?" Justin asked.

The house-elf didn't answer the question but instead gave Justin a pledge before saying, "It is in your hands now." He then vanished.

Justin jumped at a sound from behind him and he turned his wand on the newcomer. "Sorry, Ron, you startled me."

"What exactly was he talking about?" Ron's voice was somewhat strangled.

"Some story about Black being innocent," Justin said and he sat back down again.

However, Ron didn't move and his face was taut. "Mate, a house-elf only gives a pledge like that if it's telling the truth."

Justin snorted. "Big deal. It could have been making that up. I mean it even got the date of the execution wrong. It isn't until tomorrow."

Ron was well aware the house-elf couldn't be lying and he vigorously shook his head. "You don't get it, do you? Gaining clothes and being disowned is almost the worst thing that could happen to a house-elf. And, after making a pledge as that house-elf just did, if it had been lying, then a piece of clothing would have appeared in its hand and it wouldn't have just been disowned, it would have died."

Justin was still far from convinced. "How do you know that this house-elf wasn't told this mumbo jumbo about Black by another house-elf, maybe Black's own house-elf, in an effort to try and save him? Then the house-elf who came here would have no idea about the truth and would simply be doing as it was told."

"Because the same rule applies," Ron said agitatedly, aware that he was not getting his point across. "If a house-elf told a lie and made the pledge, even if it didn't know it was a lie, it would still receive clothing and then it would die. The house-elf who came here received no clothing and he's still alive, so that means he must be telling the truth."

As what this meant sank in, Justin slowly rose to his feet, dismay written all over his face. "You can't seriously mean that if someone told a lie and then asked a house-elf to deliver it and make a pledge to say it was true, it would really die."

"I'm totally serious," Ron said, anxiety written all over his face. "Justin, I know you don't want to believe it, but Sirius Black might be innocent and we can't just stand by and let the Ministry execute him. We have to do something to help him."

"We can hardly storm the Ministry," Justin pointed out a little sarcastically, still reluctant to help despite Ron's assertions.

"But we can tell someone like Professor Lupin," Ron decided, ignoring Justin's unenthusiastic attitude. "Come on."

Remus was in his rooms with Harry and Hermione when Ron and Justin burst in without bothering to knock. "I hope your unwarranted intrusion is something serious, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Finch-Fletchley."

A breathless Ron assured him it was. "It is, Sir."

"Then what is it?" Remus asked impatiently.

Justin closed the door behind him, before turning around and resignedly saying, "I was in the..."

"Sirius Black might be innocent," Ron blurted out, interrupting Justin's more restrained approach. "You have to stop the Ministry from carrying out the execution today."

Remus' face registered his surprise. "How did you know about that? Nobody outside of those invited to view the execution knew about the change in date." He glanced at Harry, who shook his head to say he had said nothing.

"We know because a house-elf told us," Ron said, and then he explained what they had been told about a bad man forcing Sirius to do his will and the pledge the house-elf had made.

However, Justin's tone was rather disparaging as he said, "Ron told me that a house-elf can't make the pledge without deadly consequences."

"He's absolutely right, Justin," Remus confirmed, "which means that the Ministry might have made a terrible mistake, and worse, that I might have made a bigger one."

Harry, whose eyes were red-rimmed, turned on Remus as he garnered what Remus meant. "You can't believe that Black was innocent. He tried to kill me, Remus, and you heard the list that Bones read out – it was longer than my arm."

"I know that," Remus said in a tired voice. "But I also know that a house-elf pledge can't be gotten around, which would mean that Sirius was innocent."

Ron tried to cheer him up. "But we can ask the Ministry to stop the execution and you'll be able to find out for certain."

Remus shook his head and passed on what he discovered during the time he had sat waiting with Harry for the execution to begin. "We've actually just arrived back from the execution. It was brought forward when Bones became worried about a threat she had received. Since the true execution date, which was supposed to have been on Monday and not tomorrow as published, has been kept out of the papers, she's worried she has a leak."

Justin lifted up his arms as if in defeat. "Then we're too late."

Remus collapsed onto the sofa, dropping his face into his hands. "He tried to tell me he was innocent just before his execution but I didn't want to listen."

"Well, I don't believe he was innocent," Harry snapped out, unwilling to give Sirius the benefit of the doubt.

Remus turned to face Harry. "Harry, sometimes things aren't always as they seem, and the house-elf's pledge has shed a totally different light on what's gone on. He said Sirius was forced to do what he did, which, if it is true, means that Sirius had to have been under the Imperius curse when he carried out those killings."

Harry gave Remus a disgusted look. "You said yourself he can fight it off because of his Family ring."

In his hope Remus had forgotten. "I did, didn't I?"

Although she knew her boyfriend wouldn't like it, Hermione threw Remus a lifeline. "Perhaps there's another reason why Black did it. What about the Imperius potion? I read about it when I was looking through that book that contained the antivenin potion."

Ron butted in before Remus could answer. "Imperius potion?"

"It's a potion that acts like the Imperius Curse and, while it has a limited potency if drunk in liquid form, it works at its most efficient when mixed with food," Hermione explained. "But even then, it only works if the imbiber takes the food willingly."

This brought up an alarming scenario for Justin. "What if say, a Death Eater was to give it to someone like Bones or Fudge? Or how about if they ended up taking tea and crumpets with the Queen or, worse, the Prime Minister? We could find ourselves under a nuclear attack!"

"It doesn't work on Muggles as it requires a certain amount of magic in the blood for it to become effective," Remus said, allaying some of Justin's fears. "Also, the brewer needs blood from both the victim and the controller to make the potion, and it has to be administered over several days, so unless Bones or Fudge gave up their blood and willingly ate the food over several days, they couldn't be affected. But most of all, the potion is very volatile and therefore difficult to brew, so there aren't too many people capable of making it."

"So who could brew it?" Justin asked. "Someone like Snape?"

"Yes, as could most Potions Masters, not that would most would because of the inherent dangers," Remus said.

Not really wanting to talk about Snape, Harry made what he thought was a good point. "It doesn't matter who might have made it because Black is dead and so we'll never know if he was innocent or not."

Remus placed both hands on Harry's shoulders. "It might matter. Harry, do you still think Sirius is guilty?"

Harry did. "Honestly, yes. He might not have been guilty of trying to kill me but he killed my family and I doubt he was under any sort of potion then."

About to say something about Voldemort and his methods, Remus instead swore softly under his breath as something occurred to him. "Fuck! Wormtail, of course!"

Ron, of course, had never heard of him. "Wormtail?"

"Peter Pettigrew," Hermione informed him, Remus having just covered the downfall of Voldemort in modern history, a class that Ron had taken because everyone else had.

"I don't understand," Ron said to Remus, now aware of who Wormtail was. "You said in our last lesson that he was a hero; that he died trying to avenge the Potter family's deaths."

"I'm not sure he was now. Sirius swore that Wormtail had been James' secret-keeper and I refused to listen," Remus responded, before he turned back to Harry. "Harry, this explains why Wormtail remained hidden as Ron's rat for all that time. He didn't hide because he was scared... he hid because he was guilty!"

"My rat?" Ron asked, growing all the more confused.

"I believe that Scabbers was really Pettigrew, and that he was hiding in Animagus form because he, not Sirius Black, betrayed the Potters," Remus said quickly in explanation before he tried to make Harry see things from his point of view. "Harry, you have to admit that Wormtail's remaining as a rat makes sense now, particularly if Sirius was truly innocent."

Harry was still far from convinced. "I still don't know, Remus. We're relying on a house-elf and, even with a pledge, I'm not sure how much I'd trust one, not without first knowing who owns it, and besides, as I've just said, it hardly matters now."

Remus thought differently. "Justin, did the house-elf give you a name?"

Justin shook his head. "Sorry, but no."

Remus called out, "Minchen."

A house-elf dressed in Hogwarts livery appeared. "Professor Remus, Sir?"

"Do you know anything about a house-elf that appeared in the library to Mr. Finch-Fletchley?" Remus asked the head of the Hogwarts house-elves.

Minchen nodded, being the house-elf who had agreed to the safe passage of the unknown house-elf into Hogwarts, but only after it had had sworn a pledge that he meant no harm. "He is called Dobby, Professor Remus, Sir."

Remus drew in a surprised breath. "Dobby? You're sure?"

"Yes," Minchen confirmed.

Remus debated things for a moment, before giving orders to Minchen. "Find Dobby and tell him that I need to speak to his mistress. She can come through my fireplace. Tell her the password is Sanctum Lupin Voldemort."

Shuddering, Ron's mouth dropped open as the house-elf vanished. "You use You-Know-Who's name as your password?"

"It's not exactly something one would guess, is it?" Remus asked, before turning as a crack sounded.

Remus was unsurprised that Dobby, rather than his mistress, had appeared, but he was surprised at the speed that Minchen had located the house-elf, and he guessed correctly that Dobby had been waiting close by to Hogwarts. "Hello, Dobby."

"Mister Remus," Dobby said politely. "How can Dobby help you?"

"I need to know how you know about Sirius," Remus demanded.

Dobby told him, "My Mistress tells Dobby to pass the message about Mister Sirius on to Mister Harry's special friend."

"Who is your Mistress?" Hermione chimed in.

Dobby refused to tell him. "I cannot tell you without her permission, Harry Potter, Sir."

Harry looked to Remus. "I think you know who she is, as you knew that Dobby had a mistress and not a master."

"I do, but I can't tell you," Remus admitted. "If she wants to reveal herself, then it's up to her." He then turned his attention back to Dobby. "So what does your Mistress have to do with this?"

"She wants you to help Mister Sirius because it was the bad man who made him do those bad things, Sir," Dobby said.

"But Sirius Black is dead!" Ron said, thinking the whole thing was now a waste of time.

"Then you cannot help him," Dobby said, about to vanish.

Remus' next words stopped Dobby in his tracks. "I can. Tell your Mistress that I might have access to something that can help to save Sirius even now."

Dobby bowed low. "Dobby comes back soon."

It was less than two minutes later when he did so. "My Mistress said she cannot help you more and that you have to be the one to save Mister Sirius." He then vanished.

Harry snorted. "Well, that was really helpful."

Justin, however, asked about Remus' comment. "How could you save Black, Professor?"

Hermione thought she had the answer. "By going back to a time before Black was Kissed and pushed through the Death Arch and somehow rescuing him."

"How?" Harry demanded, curious despite his lack of any real enthusiasm for rescuing Sirius.

"A time-turner," Hermione said.

"What's a time-turner?" Justin asked, never having heard of one before.

"It literally does what it's called," Remus told him. "With one we can turn back time, only though by twenty-four hours, and I don't actually have one although I know that Hermione does."

This was news to Harry and Justin, as well as to Ron who asked, "Where would she get one of those and why? I know from Dad that their use is restricted."

"I'm getting by in my classes using a time-turner," Hermione revealed. "I was given special permission to use one otherwise I'd never have been able to take so many subjects at once."

Harry scowled at his girlfriend. "You didn't tell me."

"Have you told her everything about you?" Remus interrupted before Hermione could answer.

Harry flushed as he realized what Remus was talking about. "No, she doesn't need to know I did that."

"Then she too is entitled to her privacy, Harry," Remus said. He then turned to Hermione. "And before you say anything, so is Harry."

"Okay, but I don't want her involved," Harry said before Hermione could say anything else.

"I can speak for myself," Hermione said, finally managing to get a word in. "And if I believe Black is truly innocent, then I think we should be doing something it."

"No," Harry said mutinously.

Remus was not surprised that Harry had taken this stance, and he reminded Harry of a conversation they had had previously. "Harry, you once told me that if you knew someone was innocent you would help them, and that it would be wrong to stand by and let them die."

Harry then remembered the long forgotten discussion that they had had about Salem and the witch trials. "I was talking about myself, which doesn't include Hermione."

"As she's just pointed out, I think that's her choice to make," Remus countered.

Now Justin interrupted. "Sir, before we decide whether or not to ask Hermione to help, how do we really know we can trust what this house-elf is saying about Black? We could be walking into a trap."

Remus was not so sure. "I'm well aware that Dobby has made a pledge and I'm equally aware that Dobby would have died if he had been lying."

Harry latched onto Justin's argument, not wanting Hermione involved at all. "I'm not even going to consider letting Hermione help unless I know for certain that it's not a trap."

Hermione scowled at Harry. "I will help if I want to." As Harry scowled back, she softened. "But I agree, I don't think we should do anything until we know for certain that this isn't a trap."

Remus agreed. "Very well then. I'll visit Dobby's mistress to talk to her and discover if she is being honest with us. If she is, Hermione, will you be willing to help?"

Hermione nodded. "As long as I can be certain it isn't a trap and that Black truly is innocent, then yes, I would."

"Then I'll hopefully be back shortly," Remus said, and he called out, "Dobby."

As if he had been waiting for a summons, Dobby reappeared. "Yes, Mister Remus?"

"Take me to your mistress," Remus demanded, and it obvious that permission had already been given since Dobby took Remus' arm and vanished with him.

Dobby's mistress was waiting for Remus and she dismissed her house-elf before turning to Remus. "Remus, it's been a long time."

"It has," Remus acknowledged in a cold voice before getting straight to business. "Why go to Harry's friend for help?"

"Because I didn't think the Hogwarts house-elves would let Dobby approach Harry Potter. I hoped that Potter's friend would tell him and that he'd turn to you," Narcissa responded.

"And why didn't you come directly to me?"

"Because of our past history, I didn't think you'd even listen bother to listen to Dobby and that you'd just send him away," Narcissa said. "I would have tried to help Sirius myself but Lucius would have killed me if I had tried to intercede as would..."

"As would who?" Remus asked, guessing that Narcissa had almost let slip something, her words trailing off.

"I can't discuss him," Narcissa said hurriedly, unwittingly revealing to Remus that the 'who' was a man. She then changed the subject. "So tell me, how are you going to revive a dead man?"

"By turning back time if I agree to do it."

"You'd refuse even after I sent Dobby to you?"

Remus decided to use the opportunity to fish for information. "I need a little more than a simple house-elf pledge."

"I can't tell you anything more except for the fact that Sirius is not guilty of what you think he is. Dobby overheard a conversation, and although I can't tell you exactly what was said and by whom, I give you my word it's the truth."

"You're asking me to gamble my life on your word?" Remus asked, his disdain for the woman in front of him evident in his tone of voice.

Narcissa opened her mouth to snap at Remus, only to rein in her rather short temper, which was currently being fueled by hope and worry about her cousin. "Remus, I know how much you dislike me, but for Sirius' sake, don't you think it might be a good idea to put our past aside and back me up on this? As a werewolf, you know very well that I'm telling the truth."

"You're right, I do dislike you, but I also know that you're telling the truth. But let's face it, Narcissa, you're married to Malfoy," Remus pointed out. "We both know what he is and, given your little speech about a mystery man and not being able to help, you could be walking whoever goes to rescue Sirius into a trap."

"Remus, think logically about this," Narcissa snapped irritably, her short temper re-emerging. "As far as everyone is concerned, Sirius is dead!"

"But if I go back in time that won't be the case," Remus countered, "which means I could still be walking into some sort of trap."

Narcissa half wished she had not asked Remus to think logically, but she knew he would have used the argument no matter what. "In that case, what you have to decide is whether rescuing Sirius is worth risking your life for."

Remus experienced a rush of guilt at refusing to believe in his friend's innocence. "I do believe that he is worth it, but I still don't know why you are willing to do this."

"Because I'm as guilty as you are for not believing in Sirius before now," Narcissa said, before revealing what was driving her guilt. "Just before Regulus Black went missing, I went to Sirius to ask for his help to try to leave the Death Eaters and he refused me. I thought that out of everyone I knew he would have helped me, but even after I told him that it had not been my choice to join, he still said no and we exchanged a great deal of heated words. After the Potters were killed, I believed he'd refused because he was a Death Eater after all."

"He probably refused because he was disgusted you'd joined in the first place and he obviously couldn't have believed it was against your will," Remus said, having believed the same himself. "A little like myself."

Wanting Remus to believe in her, Narcissa pulled out her wand, Remus copying her actions. "I swear on my life and magic that it was not my choice to join the Death Eaters and, that as far as I am aware, Sirius was not guilty of any of the crimes for which he was convicted. I also swear that as far as I am aware, I am not leading you, Remus John Lupin, into a trap of any kind. Now please, will you help him?"

Now satisfied that Narcissa was wholly genuine in her wish to help, Remus lowered his wand. "Very well. I need somewhere Sirius can go if I can get him out. I can't risk taking him to my house, at least not until I'm certain that I won't fall under suspicion for breaking Sirius out of the Ministry. And before you say you can't help me, if you refuse to do so, then the whole thing is off."

"You can take him to Black Lake Cottage," Narcissa said after a moment's thought, not realizing that Remus was calling her bluff, and she wrote down the apparition co-ordinates. "Sirius knows it well, having spent a great deal of time there as a child. However, through

a bequest it now belongs to me, but Sirius should have no problems getting through the wards, which as head of the Black Family he can tweak as he sees fit. It's also a property of which no-one at the Ministry is aware. But, given that Lucius is aware of its existence because I use it as a retreat when I need some time alone, I think you should make Sirius' stay there short term only. I don't want Lucius trying to get in and failing, although to be honest he has no real reason to visit."

Remus took the parchment from Narcissa. "Despite your oath, if I walk into a trap, then I promise I'll be back to deal with you and believe me the results won't be pretty."

Narcissa could not hide her shiver. "Remus, I..."

"Save it, Narcissa," Remus responded, stepping away from her outstretched hand. "We said all we had to years ago and, as far as I'm concerned, our business is now concluded." He then vanished, returning via several jumps to the Ministry before heading back into school, deciding to go the long way rather than flooing so that he could think as he walked.

Harry stood up when Remus came through the door, bearing his pensieve, which he put down as he walked in. "Well?"

"I'm definitely going to need your help, Hermione," Remus said in response. "But if you say no, then I'll let the matter drop."

Hermione had a question for Remus. "Do you trust this Dobby's mistress?"

Remus was honest and shook his head. "Not really but she was telling the truth about wanting to help Sirius and that she believes he's innocent of any crimes. She also let slip about a man who was behind this although she refused to tell me more."

After spending a few minutes weighing up the pros and cons of the discussion and asking Remus a few more pointed questions, Hermione finally took a deep breath and turned to her boyfriend. "Harry, I believe that Sirius Black is innocent and I want to help."

Harry took Hermione's hands. "You do know you could get into trouble for this?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, but it's the right thing to do. I don't think I could live with the shame if I stood by and did nothing. If it turns out we were wrong, we can ask Remus to obliviate him and return him to the Ministry."

Harry could find no plausible argument against Hermione's logical response, and so he said, "Then let's do this."

Remus let out a sigh of relief at Harry's words and he put into motion what he had decided on his walk back to Hogwarts. "First of all, I need to review my memory of the execution. Only then can I decide what to do, if anything at all."

"You have a pensieve?" Ron asked in amazement, not having noticed what Harry had spotted.

"I do," Remus said, before picking it up from the bookcase by the door. He then placed his own memory of the event inside. "Does anyone else wish to view this?"

Everybody did, including Harry, and, taking his girlfriend's hand, he plunged in.

Once inside, Remus began the memory.

Hermione said nothing during the whole thing, not until it ended and they had all withdrawn from the pensieve. She then erected a privacy bubble as Harry had taught her to, not wishing to reveal Remus' lupine abilities to Justin or Ron. "Professor, you must have known that Black was telling the truth."

"I didn't. My own anger was far too close to the surface and there was so much hatred swirling around me it would have been impossible to pick Sirius' emotions out." Remus shook his head in dismay. "And what would I have done if I had? Stood up and declared what I was?"

Hermione immediately subsided. "I suppose not. I'm sorry, Professor."

After accepting the apology, Remus dispelled the bubble to discover the three young men talking furiously. He promptly interrupted them. "Have you three come up with anything?"

Justin wondered what the couple had been talking about but he instead answered Remus' question. "I think if we do help him you will have to take the place of someone in the Death Chamber... probably one of the two Aurors who are behind that screen and maybe use the Imperius curse on the other one."

Ron, however, had a question. "How will you get into Auror Division before the execution and how will you even find those Aurors?"

Finally, although reluctantly, onboard with the idea of rescuing Sirius, Harry was easily able to answer part of the question. "Remus and I passed them going into Auror HQ on our way to the execution. I only remembered them because the one on the left had such long red hair."

"Don't you need to be an Auror to get into there?" Justin asked.

"Yes," Harry said. "But I do know that Bones hasn't revoked my level one clearance."

"Even though you're not due to go back to BritAD yet?" Justin asked in surprise, still completely unaware of Harry's standing as an Unspeakable or of his falling out with Amelia.

Remus smoothly answered this question. "Harry needed his pass to gain clearance to witness Sirius' execution."

"Professor, what happens if Bones finds out that he's used the pass?"

Hermione snorted at Justin in a most unladylike way. "She'd never believe it was Harry – the very thought of him rescuing Black is ludicrous."

Harry had to admit that his girlfriend had a good point. "Hermione is right. And if I'm already there and in plain sight, how could I have rescued Black?"

"Exactly," Hermione said. "Although I have to be honest and say that I'm not entirely happy about you doing this."

"Neither am I," Harry said wryly, wishing his conscious wasn't quite so active. "But we need me to get Remus into Auror HQ."

"And I'll be going too," Hermione said.

Harry shook his head. "Absolutely not. You can turn back time from here."

"If you want my help," Hermione said in a resolute voice, "then I'm going."

Hermione's proviso meant that Harry spent the next five minutes arguing with her but she refused to budge. In the end he compromised with her by saying that she could accompany them so far but that she would leave when he told her to, otherwise he was calling the whole thing off. Aware that Harry would rather let an innocent man die than see her injured or killed, Hermione pretended to agree to Harry's terms, even though she fully intended to stay with him no matter what he said. Harry, who had never known Hermione to be anything but truthful, believed in her capitulation.

Ron immediately asked Remus a question as soon as Harry had finished arguing. "So what happens once you get into Auror quarters?"

"I hijack the body of one of the Aurors you saw accompanying Sirius behind the screen and curse the other one," Remus said.

Hermione thought it rather too simplistic. "And afterwards, how do you plan to get Black out?"

"I'm going to walk out of the front door," Remus said boldly, although he was feeling far from that.

"And I have the feeling you're going to succeed, at least in taking over the Auror," Ron added.

"Feelings aren't going to be enough," Justin said in dismay.

Ron explained his reasoning, proving that his deductive reasoning was better than any of them would have given him credit for. "I know but when Black called out Professor Lupin's name, it sounded more like surprise than misery. I therefore think Professor Lupin revealed himself to Black and he answered without thinking. It's the sort of thing I'd probably have done."

Everyone re-entered the pensieve and Remus replayed the memory and listened again, as did everyone else, including Justin, who immediately apologized.

"You're right, Ron. I apologize... I didn't notice."

Hermione had also spotted something. "I think that flash we saw might be the Patronus charm."

"I didn't think of that. I thought it was a flash from activating the archway," Remus said, staring at the frozen flash. "It hasn't been used for an execution in over a hundred years and so no-one knew what to expect."

"Which works to our advantage," Hermione quite correctly stated. "Before the screen drops, you need to place an invisibility spell on Black."

After yet again leaving the pensieve, Remus brought up what else they would need. "If I'm going to be casting spells, then I'll need an untraceable wand so that I don't leave my usual magical signature, polyjuice potion and a copy of a uniform, all of which I believe I can acquire."

"I think I should take the place of the second Auror," Harry decided suddenly. "If the Imperius Curse failed at the wrong time, you'd be in trouble, Remus."

"I don't think you should," Justin said. "If you think using the Curse will be a problem, then I'll go with Professor Lupin."

Harry immediately got into another argument, this time with Justin. "No way. It was my idea and I think I'm the best person for the job."

Justin disagreed. "No, you're not, Harry. The wizarding world needs you."

Ron agreed with Justin. "He's right. One of us should go."

Harry refused. "No, if we do this, I go. I'm more capable than either of you of fighting my way out if I need to. You know I am."

Remus put paid to that part of Harry's argument. "I don't want to engage anyone in a fight but if I do agree to your accompanying me and we do have to fight our way out, you're not to use lethal force."

Harry was hurt that Remus thought he would. "I'd never do that."

Remus apologized. "I'm sorry I said that but I don't want anyone else to die because of Sirius." He then made a decision. "Justin, Harry is right. If it does come down to the wire, Harry is more likely to be able to fight his way out of this than either you or Ron."

"It's too dangerous," Hermione interjected. "Bones would execute him if she found him trying to break out Black."

"I'm going," Harry said steadfastly. "And Remus knows I'm right about the Curse. It can be broken and he's going to have enough to concentrate on without worrying about that."

Remus pulled Harry to one side and erected a privacy bubble. "Harry, I need you to think long and hard about this. I know I've pushed for your acquiescence because it's Sirius, but as Hermione has just pointed out, this could be dangerous and your safety has to come first. If this goes wrong, you know what will happen to both of us: Bones will come down on us like a ton of bricks and even Ignotus won't be able to pull us out of the fire on this one."

Harry's stomach lurched at the thought of having to go through what Sirius had, but he remained steadfast. "We'll just have to hope that nothing goes wrong then."

Remus held the bubble up for a while longer as he hadn't quite finished. "Harry, just know that you can change your mind at any time, at least until we have to take those Aurors' place. I do care about Sirius, but I care about you more."

Harry choked up at Remus' sentiment and he hugged the man. "And I care about you and I wish we didn't have to do this, but we do, even if it costs me my life."

"Harry, please think about this, because, if I were to die, then it's the right thing for me to do," Remus said as Harry released him. "But for you..."

Harry interrupted. "It's my decision to make, Remus, and while I might still have doubts about Black, I do trust you and if you say you honestly believe Black is innocent then I'm in."

Remus knew that if he showed one ounce of doubt, Harry would back out, and for moment he considered doing so, but he would be lying if he did. "I do, Harry. Utterly and totally."

"Then we have to change what's been done," Harry answered, and he dropped the privacy bubble.

Remus turned to Ron and Justin. "Harry is going to take the place of the second Auror."

Aware that Remus had obviously made up his mind, Justin begrudgingly relented. "Fine, but I'm coming with you no matter what Harry says."

"Then so am I," Ron added, not about to be left behind.

"And me," Hermione said.

Remus sighed, but he gave in. "Okay, but by the time Harry and I leave to rescue Sirius, I want the three of you long gone."

After all of them agreed, Harry left the room to pick up his broomstick.

In his room, Remus thought about what he himself needed. "I'll also take my broomstick – it's in that cupboard there – Ron, if you could get it for me. I'm just going to acquire some polyjuice potion."

"Professor Snape will be furious when he finds out that someone has raided his stock," Hermione warned Remus, immediately guessing where Remus was going to take it from.

"Ask me if I care," Remus said and he let himself out of his rooms. When everyone got back, he set about sorting out alibis for those who needed one, as well as checking that everyone knew what they were doing.

After some more discussion, the plan was about to be put into action when Harry received a pressing missive. "It's from Bones saying she needs to speak urgently to me and that I need to report to her at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade. She's demanding that I be there at one." Harry threw Remus a nervous look. "What do you think she wants?"

"I've no clue," Remus said. "But I think a slight change in plans would be a good idea, as well as an oath to keep this secret."

After going over the new plan and obtaining oaths from all those there, the group left the room.

Next Chapter: Harry pays a visit to Hogsmeade.

Note: Thank you to Mantimeforgot for the line about the tea and crumpets – it tickled me so much I changed what I had originally put in the story and included it in its place.

Note 2: I should update on Wednesday/Thursday.

Chapter 48: Trapped

1 p.m. Hogsmeade: One and half hours after the Execution

In one of the guest rooms of the Three Broomsticks, Amelia was surprised to see Justin accompanying Harry. "If I recall correctly, it's Mr. Finch-Fletchley, isn't it?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Justin responded politely, suspecting that Amelia had actually had no problem remembering him from the two weeks he had spent at Auror Division.

Amelia asked Tonks to remain and she pointed at the chairs. "Sit down."

Harry and Justin did so, Harry taking the offensive. "Why did you want to see me, Madam Bones?"

"I expected to see you with Professor Lupin and not your friend," Amelia said, ignoring Harry's question.

"Your note just asked for me. Justin is with me because he needed some supplies and, when we arrived here, Auror Tonks told him he had to accompany me to see you," Harry countered.

Tonks immediately apologized. "I'm sorry, Ma'am. I brought Mr. Finch-Fletchley in with Mr. Potter as you said to bring in Mr. Potter and his companion when they arrived."

"No need to apologize, Auror Tonks, although I did give that order because I expected Professor Lupin to be escorting Mr. Potter," Amelia said, dismissing Tonks' apology. "Mr. Potter, do you know where Professor Lupin is right now?"

"Hogwarts," Harry told her, although he was rather alarmed by Amelia's interest in Remus.

"I'll be checking on that."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

Amelia didn't hesitate and got straight to the point. "I believe someone tried to help Sirius Black escape from the Ministry today..."

Harry interrupted her. "You can't believe Remus would help him."

"No, but as he was with you today and I believe you somehow had something to do with Black's escape attempt, I still wish to question Professor Lupin."

Trying to take the focus off Remus, Harry brought it back onto himself. "But why on earth would you even for one moment think I'd help Black? He tried to kill me!"

Amelia had to admit to herself that she may have been a little premature in accusing Harry, but the evidence suggested otherwise, and so she stated one of the reasons behind her accusation. "I believe that I saw you walking through the Atrium three hours before the actual execution."

Harry suspected that if he hadn't taken calming potion, his heart would by now have been banging away inside of his chest, but instead he was able to keep his cool as he said calmly, "But three hours before the execution I was in school having a late breakfast, as back then I had no idea that the time and date had been changed. I then went to the Library to do some studying before Remus came for me about an hour before the execution and then we left to head for the Ministry, so I don't see how you could have seen me."

Amelia then revealed her most damning evidence. "I'll be checking that and maybe I was mistaken about seeing you but I'm not mistaken about the fact that your Auror pass was used to access the Auror Lounge on the sixth level some fifty or so minutes prior to the execution when you would have been in the Ministry. Perhaps you might care to explain that."

"I can't but since I believe that I was in a queue waiting to be escorted to the Death Chamber at about that time, I don't see how I could have been in two places at once."

Amelia shot Harry a look of disbelief. "You're trying to tell me that a sixth year Potions student hasn't heard of polyjuice potion."

"Yes, I have," Harry said, now more thankful than ever for the calming potion that was allowing him to keep calm under pressure.

"But I can promise you that I haven't ever made or used polyjuice potion."

"Your word no longer holds any merit for me, so I think I'd prefer to put my trust in Veritaserum," Amelia declared in a grim voice, now having little faith in Harry after his deceitful attendance of BritAD. She therefore snapped out an order to Tonks to fly to Hogwarts and acquire some Veritaserum from Snape, whom she suspected might have some, her usual stock being currently unavailable to her.

Amelia then left the room with Tonks, and so Justin went to ask Harry a question, only for Harry to shake his head and mouth 'later'. Harry didn't trust Bones not to have booby trapped the room.

When she returned, Amelia was holding two small bottles. "Professor Snape has provided the Veritaserum I need. Please open your mouth."

Harry didn't do so straightaway. "Did he know it was for me?"

"Does that matter?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I wouldn't put it past him to poison me. We don't exactly like each other."

"I wonder why," Amelia remarked in a dry voice. "But the answer to your question is no, Auror Tonks didn't tell him who it was for, so I'd appreciate it if you would please stick out your tongue for me."

"Do you have my guardian's permission to use this?" Harry countered, aware that since he was still under seventeen, Amelia couldn't administer the Veritaserum without permission from one of the Weasleys or, if they were unavailable, Remus.

"Arthur Weasley gave me permission," Amelia confirmed. "So let's begin."

Harry now had little choice but to let Amelia administer the Veritaserum before she began to question him again.

"Where were you three hours ago?"

"At breakfast."

"Did you leave Hogwarts at any time this morning except to attend the execution?"

"No."

"After eating breakfast did you go to the library and remain there until Professor Lupin came to fetch you for the execution?"

"Yes."

"Have you asked anyone to make polyjuice potion for you, stolen any polyjuice potion or asked anyone to impersonate you in order to rescue Sirius Black?"

"No."

"Did you use your pass to gain access to the Auror Lounge at 10.38 a.m. this morning?"

"No."

"Did you give your pass to anyone else to use?"

"No."

"Where is your pass?"

"In my book bag."

Having exhausted the questions she wished to ask, Amelia dosed Harry with the antidote. "I apologize, Mr. Potter, but I'm sure you understand why I had to ask you those questions."

"I suppose," Harry said grudgingly. "So may I go now, Madam Bones?"

"In a moment," Amelia said, as she still had one more issue to deal with as far as Harry was concerned. "If your pass is in your book bag, then I'd like to come back with you and recover it, if you don't mind."

Harry wanted to say he did but under the circumstances he shook his head and confirmed his acquiescence. "Not at all."

Harry and Justin were subsequently escorted on foot back to Hogwarts by Tonks, another Auror named Shacklebolt, and Amelia. On arriving back, Justin was told to remain in the Hufflepuff common room with Tonks and Harry was led into his bedroom by Amelia and Shacklebolt, where he checked through his bag to discover his pass was missing, something that was rather worrisome. "It's gone."

"Do you have any idea what might have happened to your pass?"

Harry closed his eyes as if in deep thought, but it was more to calm his nerves than anything else now that the calming potion had completely worn off, before he looked back up. "I suppose I could have lost it a few days ago. I slipped and my bag dropped open. I thought I'd picked everything up."

Although Harry had confirmed under Veritaserum that he had not given his pass to anyone, Amelia was not about to leave any stone unturned. "I want to use Veritaserum again to check that while you may not have freely handed your pass over to someone, you also didn't simply leaving it lying on the floor for someone else to take."

"Veritaserum makes me feel sick," Harry said honestly. "May I swear an oath that I'm telling the truth instead?"

"You may," Amelia said, only having the one issue to deal with.

As a now scowling Harry swore the requisite oath, Amelia turned to Shacklebolt. "Please check with the Headmaster to see if anyone has handed in Mr. Potter's Auror pass and to see if any polyjuice potion has been taken from Professor Snape's stores."

As Shacklebolt left, Amelia sighed. "I suspect if polyjuice potion is missing then the person I saw wasn't you, which would mean that my culprit is connected to one of the students, more specifically the one who found your pass."

"I said I hadn't helped Black," Harry reminded her. "And to be honest, even though things aren't particularly friendly between us now, I'm still surprised you even considered it."

"I'm head of Auror Division," Amelia reminded him in turn. "And it's my duty to look at every possibility, even the ones that might seem

odd or unusual, such as spotting you and then your pass being used. Whoever took it must have considered themselves very lucky to have discovered the pass so close to Black's execution."

"Did whoever tried to rescue Black cause any trouble?" Harry asked, deciding to try and pump Amelia for as much information as he possibly could.

"No, as you saw yourself, the procedure went as planned."

"But if everything went to plan, how did you know that someone had tried to break Black out?" Harry asked, curious as to how Amelia had connected the use of his pass to a possible escape. "You couldn't have known that just because someone had used my pass."

Amelia admitted that was true. "I didn't. Two of our Aurors were found unconscious a short time after the execution, and they were the same two who supposedly witnessed and carried out the final part of it. On questioning them, they denied having been there meaning that someone must have taken their place, and of course I thought one of their replacements was you."

"But I wasn't, was I?" Harry interjected.

"If you don't want to hear why you were a suspect I can always stop," Amelia threatened, a little annoyed at Harry's snide remark.

Wanting to learn as much he could, Harry quickly backpedaled. "I do. I'm sorry, please go on."

Slightly mollified by the apology, Amelia continued. "It wasn't just the Aurors that made me believe it might be you. We also found evidence that someone had accessed several rooms in the Department of Mysteries and, as these rooms had been cleared in preparation for the execution, no-one should have been in there until tomorrow. Finally I learned about the use of your pass to access the Lounge..."

"Wouldn't it have made more sense for me to use my pass to get out of the DOM rather than taking a chance?" Harry asked.

"You know as well as I do that it would recognize your magical signature unlike the door to the Auror Lounge and so, when I

connected everything I had discovered up with my sighting of you, it led me to believe that you had had a change of heart..."

Harry snorted. "A change of heart? I almost died at Black's hands."

"Stranger things have happened, Mr. Potter," Amelia said truthfully. "And in coming to that conclusion I was also taking into consideration that Professor Lupin, who I'm now well aware is your bodyguard as well as an alternate guardian, was once extremely close to Black. I assumed it wouldn't take much for him to sway you to his way of thinking if he had changed his mind about his former friend."

"Didn't you hear him in the Death Chamber?"

"Yes, but he's a good enough actor to have fooled a lot of people into thinking he's just a two-bit detective when in reality we both know he's anything but that..."

"And so you thought he was just acting when he was so horrid to Black, although I've got no idea how he could have been doing that and trying to break Black out," Harry said, hoping his own acting was coming up to snuff. "Unless, of course, you think he was polyjuiced as well."

"It did cross my mind," Amelia admitted. "But under the circumstances, if Auror Shacklebolt confirms the missing polyjuice potion, I can rule you both out from my enquiries."

"That's nice to hear," Harry said honestly before trying to do a little more fishing before Shacklebolt returned. "So did you come to any conclusion as to why nobody rescued Black in the end?"

Amelia thought it obvious. "Yes. It was because there were too many Aurors and spectators in the Death Chamber. And to top things off, I believe that whoever had replaced my men also received a bit of a shock. I don't think they realized that the Kiss was going to be administered first and, as you might remember, one of them didn't take to seeing the Kiss so well."

Harry's opportunity to ask Amelia anything else ended as Shacklebolt came through the dormitory door and Amelia asked, "What have you discovered?"

"That nobody has handed Mr. Potter's Auror pass in, but apparently Professor Snape did uncover a theft of polyjuice potion from his store but he has no idea when it went missing," Shacklebolt informed Amelia. "Do you want me to arrange for the students to be questioned?"

Amelia thought about it for a moment before deciding against it, well aware of what barriers she would hit if she did. "No, it would be a waste of time and resources as we would need to get parental permission to administer Veritaserum and I suspect that more than one parent would refuse. You may go."

"So whoever found my pass must have definitely taken the polyjuice."

"Yes, and it also confirms my belief that I saw you today or at least someone masquerading as you," Amelia said, tiredly rubbing her neck. "Mr. Potter, I'll leave you be. Obviously, given our previous conversation, you won't be returning to BritAD in a trainee Auror capacity and, as you will no longer need level one clearance to attend any more executions, I won't be reissuing your pass. But given your status as an Unspeakable, I'm quite certain you no longer need it."

"Obviously not," Harry responded. "Is that everything then?"

"I imagine so, but if I have any more questions I know where you are," Amelia said before taking her leave of Harry. "Good afternoon, Mr. Potter."

Harry politely inclined his head. "Madam Bones."

The moment the door closed behind Amelia, Harry sagged onto the bed, his legs feeling like jelly as relief washed over him. He sat back up as a knock sounded and the door opened again, but this time it was only Justin.

He sat down beside Harry, who he thought looked somewhat pale. "Are you all right, Harry?"

"I'm okay," Harry said, his voice shaking slightly. "It was just a little intense."

"What's happened between you and Bones?" Justin asked, now finally able to talk freely. "When I've seen you two together previously at the Ministry it was almost as if you were friends but today I'd say her feelings for you were closer to dislike."

"I can't tell you why we don't get along anymore," Harry had to say, not able to think of an excuse for his and Amelia's discord. "At least not yet."

Trusting Harry, Justin backed off. "So what do we do now? Do we still go ahead now that your pass is missing?"

"How do you know about that?"

"I overheard Shacklebolt say to Tonks about it before he went to speak to Flitwick. So what did Bones say to you about it?"

"She let me swear an oath that during the week I had dropped my bag I keep the pass in and that I hadn't deliberately dropped the pass and left it behind," Harry revealed.

Justin had been there when Harry had dropped his bag so this wasn't news to him. "So we're definitely still going ahead?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed, although his stomach lurched at the thought of doing so given how close Bones had come to figuring out the truth. "And more importantly, Bones told me some information that we can use to help us."

"How did you..." Justin stopped mid-sentence as the door opened and Ernie came in.

Harry got up off the bed. "Ernie, could you give us a minute?"

"Harry, it's my room as well," Ernie responded. "And why do you need a minute?"

Justin smoothly said, "Harry was about to give me some personal advice."

Ernie immediately became contrite. "I'm sorry. Look, I'll go take a shower."

Well aware of time ticking by, Justin stood up and told Ernie not to bother. "It's okay. We'll go somewhere else."

"Let's go then," Harry said, picking up his cloak and passing Justin his as well.

Justin put on the cloak. "Thanks."

The two boys then headed for Remus' rooms.

Having been to speak to Filius again to tell him that she was concluding her investigation of Harry and Remus, having now totally ruled them out given the lack of evidence against them, Amelia was leaving when she came across Harry and Justin walking up the stairs. "Mr. Potter, Mr. Finch-Fletchley."

"Madam Bones," both young men intoned before continuing on their way.

As Amelia headed out of the building, Harry remained in her thoughts since, even though the evidence said otherwise, she still was unable to shake the feeling that somehow Harry had had something to do with the possible escape attempt. Unfortunately, since he had taken Veritaserum, she was unable to figure out how he might have been involved, and at that time, she had to get back to Hogsmeade and, if it was now viable to enter it, the Ministry; she had a lot of explaining and work to do, the planned holiday she had intended to take fast becoming a pipe dream.

Remus' Rooms: 2 p.m.

Hermione opened the door to let Harry and Justin in. "Is everything okay? You look worried."

Harry thought this a rather odd question considering where he had just been. "I'm fine." He looked around the room. "Where are Remus and Ron?"

"Ron's in the bathroom and the Professor has gone out," Hermione said.

"Gone where?"

"I don't know, he didn't say – he just left us here to do our homework," Hermione said, pointing at the table.

"Homework?" Justin asked in surprise. "At a time like this?"

"A time like what?" Hermione asked, her confusion at Justin's comment very obvious.

Harry exchanged concerned looks with Justin before a horrible suspicion began to form in Harry's mind. He therefore asked, "Do you remember what happened this morning?"

Hermione nodded and answered, not catching on to what was bothering Harry, although just like Harry had a moment ago, she thought his question strange. "You went to Black's execution and then came back. Afterwards, you and Justin went into Hogsmeade to get a few things, and Professor Lupin said Ron and I could stay behind and study in his rooms."

Then Ron came in from the bathroom and he repeated almost verbatim what he had been doing.

"Obliviation!" both Harry and Justin said at the same time.

Hermione stared at Harry as if he had gone mad and said as much. "That's ridiculous, Harry."

"I'll prove it." Harry then looked around the room for Remus' pensieve to discover it was missing, preventing Harry from showing Hermione and Ron any memories of what had happened. "Damn it! He's decided to try and do this without me."

"Do what?" Ron asked.

"Break..." Justin's sentence was cut off as Harry slapped a hand over his mouth.

"You're forgetting what we did before leaving for Hogsmeade," Harry said in warning, although he suspected that Remus would have made a counter-oath to the oath they had all sworn but he wasn't about to take the chance.

"Damn him!" Justin bit out, now as annoyed as Harry.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked.

"We'll explain shortly," Harry said and he erected a privacy bubble around himself and Justin. "So what do we do now? We can't risk revealing about Black because I think Remus will have ensured that we fall asleep rather than dying if we spill the beans to Hermione and Ron, and only someone like an Unspeakable will be able to wake us."

"An Unspeakable?"

"Again, I'll explain later," Harry said, before going on. "Given that we can't say anything, how do we get Hermione to use the time-turner for us?"

"How about asking that house-elf, Dobby, to tell them?" Justin suggested.

Harry's face lit up. "Great idea." Keeping up the privacy bubble, he yelled out for the Hogwarts house-elf Remus had requested at the start of their exploits, "Minchen".

When the house-elf appeared, Harry asked him to contact Dobby.

The little house-elf materialized after a short time and bowed his head. "Mister Harry Potter, Sir, what can Dobby do for you?"

"Tell Hermione and Ron what Remus is going to do today," Harry demanded, the bubble now long having dissipated. "I can't do it."

Dobby was in the same predicament, his loyalty to his mistress preventing him from doing so. "But Dobby also cannot tell them. My mistress has not said Dobby can."

"Then tell your mistress I need to speak to her as a matter of urgency," Harry ordered in a sharp voice. "Tell her that I need someone to tell Hermione and Ron about Remus, and that if she doesn't help me then Remus is walking into a trap and might die."

Dobby vanished, before he returned a short time later. "My mistress said Dobby can speak freely."

"Then please tell our friends what you know," Justin said gently, noticing that the house-elf seemed almost afraid of Harry now that Harry had snapped at it.

Dobby's bottom lip quivered at Justin's soft tone and his use of the word 'please'. "Of course, friend of Harry Potter." He then spoke to Hermione and Ron. "Mister Remus is going to rescue Mister Sirius."

"But he's a killer," Ron almost yelled at the top of his voice in shock. "Why would the Professor help him?"

"He wouldn't without good reason," Hermione said after a moment's thought. "And since Harry and Justin can't tell us why, they've obviously sworn an oath and that's why they need Dobby here." She knelt down in front of Dobby. "How is the Professor going to save Black?"

"By going back to help him," Dobby said before reaching out in a fearful fashion to take hold of Hermione's necklace, his fingers brushing over the time-turner on it, and his voice dropped to almost a reverent whisper. "By using this."

"My charm?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"It's a time-turner," Harry said shortly.

Hermione didn't bother asking how Harry knew she had had a time-turner. Instead she told him what she believed was true. "Harry, I don't have a time-turner, at least not anymore; I stopped using it a few weeks ago."

"No, you didn't," Harry barked out and he pointed to the miniature silver hourglass that Dobby had just released. "As Dobby just said, it's that."

"No, it's not," Hermione said, rolling her eyes. "This is just a charm my parents bought for me."

"Then let's test it out," Harry said, his temper rising, more at what Remus had managed to do than at his girlfriend's refusal to believe what was right in front of her eyes. "Go into the bedroom and turn back time to ten minutes ago and then I'll come in."

Hermione by now was getting exasperated. "For the third time, Harry, it's not a time-turner and, even if it was, I can't remember how to use it."

"Son of a bitch!" Harry snarled. "He's definitely done his utmost to make sure we can't follow him and I know I have to be there with him."

Justin tugged Harry away from Hermione and erected a privacy bubble. "Harry, you're not helping matters by getting angry and, to be honest, I thought you didn't think Black was truly innocent."

"I don't but Remus does and I just know that if I can't somehow get back, he's going to die," Harry snapped, before taking a deep breath. "Sorry, Justin, but I'm just scared to death about what might happen to him if I don't try. I don't want to lose any more of my family because of Black, and Remus is that to me, family."

As Harry's voice caught and broke on the final word, Justin tugged his friend into a hug before releasing him. "We'll get him back, Harry."

Harry wiped his eyes as he pulled back. "Yes, we will." He then coughed before saying gruffly, "But if we do, I don't want you risking yourself for Remus – you mean as much to me as he does."

Justin felt the same way about Harry and he too choked up, trying to cover it up by punching Harry lightly in his shoulder. "I love you too, you idiot."

Harry wanted to break down and bawl at Justin's sentiment but instead he squared his shoulders. "Just promise me you'll be careful."

"Likewise." Justin said before also straightening up. "Now I think we should stop wailing like a couple of girls and get on with the job." He placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Just lose the temper though."

The somewhat mawkish interlude had helped with Harry's temper, his anger having dissipated. "I will."

After dropping the bubble, Harry got straight down to business by taking his girlfriend's hands in his own and asking, "Do you trust me?"

Hermione immediately nodded. "Of course I do."

"Then please listen," Harry said, his grip tightening slightly. "I know every instinct is telling you that that charm is not a time-turner, Hermione, but I promise you it is. And you have to help me save Remus by using it."

Although what Remus had implanted in her mind was warring with what Harry was telling her, Hermione put her trust in Harry. "But I don't remember how to use it, and I can't imagine the Library carrying a book in it to tell me..."

Justin suddenly interrupted as something occurred to him. "Why didn't the Professor take it from her?"

This much Hermione could remember about time-turners. "Because they're charmed against theft." She gave a small yell of frustration. "Why can I remember that and not that this thing is a time-turner and how to use it?"

"Because Remus made sure of it," Harry said softly. "Although I expect he'll reinstate your memories if we can get him back."

Ron had a question for Harry. "Why is the Professor even considering helping Black? And why are you? You went to his ruddy execution this morning and I know you wanted him dead."

Harry erected yet another privacy bubble to speak to Justin. "Do you think I could tell them what happened at the execution this morning and about our conversation with Bones? I think I can, but I just want to be sure before I say anything."

Justin thought back and agreed with Harry's assessment. "I think you can - the Professor didn't include these when we made our oaths. Dobby can also tell Ron and Hermione about the 'bad man', something he hasn't so far done."

Bringing Dobby in the bubble, Harry said to him, "Dobby, would you tell Hermione and Ron about the bad man and that your mistress and Remus believe Sirius to be innocent?"

"Yes, Mister Harry, Sir."

After listening to Dobby's tale, Ron frowned. "And you honestly think Black is innocent?"

"Not entirely, but as Dobby just told you, Remus does and that's enough for me," Harry said. "And since you can't view any memories as Remus has taken his pensieve, let me tell you what happened this morning at the execution. Hermione, obviously I can't tell you about our conclusions but I'm hoping you'll be able to work them out for yourself."

And so Harry began to tell them about the execution before moving on to the talk he had had with Bones. "...and Bones said that they discovered two Aurors who had been impersonated and not one, so..."

Hermione had made various comments during Harry's recitation and she now did so again. "Of course the Professor doesn't know this because he left before you could tell him."

Harry nodded. "Yes, and that's why I have to be there and why we have to find a way to figure out how to use that time-turner."

Up until then Ron had been reluctant to help but given what he had just discovered, he made a confession. "I didn't want to tell you this until I learned why you wanted to help Black, but actually I think I know how the time-turner works."

Harry reined in his seemingly close-to-the-surface temper at a sharp nudge from Justin and he asked, "How?"

Guessing that Harry was angry, Ron quickly told him what he knew. "You have to turn the little glass backwards. I sort of remember Dad explaining about them when he found one in a Muggle's home and they had ended up with ten of themselves all trying to beat each other up."

"That's the danger of time-turners and why their use is restricted by the Ministry," Hermione said in a prim voice before going on. "This is so frustrating. I know all that but..."

Harry took hold of Hermione's hand. "I understand you must be upset..."

"Upset doesn't even cover it," Hermione said, now also starting to get angry. "He had no right to do this to me."

"No, he didn't but he has and we're going to find a way around it." Harry squeezed Hermione's hand before letting it go and asking Ron a question. "So did Uncle Arthur tell you anything else about how to use it?"

Ron shook his head. "Sorry, I wasn't exactly listening but I think it was so much of a turn per hour."

"Then I'm going to have to guess, although logic would dictate one rotation per hour," Hermione said, before she made sure that what she was about to do was what Harry really wanted. "Harry, are you one hundred per cent sure you're supposed to be there?"

"Yes," Harry said vehemently. "I am."

"Then let's go rescue Black," Ron interjected, feeling guilty about not coming clean earlier. He then looked hesitantly at Harry. "You are taking us with you, aren't you?"

"Of course," Harry said, not about to make his friends stay behind.

Justin, however, added a caveat. "But we're going to leave when Harry goes to find Remus."

Ron scowled at this but when Harry said he'd go back on his word and leave Ron behind if he refused, Ron agreed. "Okay then."

Dobby's job now done, Justin smiled down at Dobby. "Thank you so much for your help, Dobby. And please thank your mistress for her kind help."

Dobby bowed low, his bottom lip quivering again. "I will, friend of Dobby." He then vanished.

Harry smiled in amazement at Justin. "You seem to have gone up in his estimation."

"You were rude to him, Harry," Justin reminded his friend. "And I was nice."

"I was worried about Remus," Harry said in his defense.

"Then perhaps we should stop talking and try to locate him," Hermione said as she tugged out the time-turner. "So do we do this here?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I think we should head to the Shrieking Shack."

Harry stood outside of the Shrieking Shack and said, "Well, I guess this is it." He turned to Hermione. "After you use the time-turner, I want you to go to Remus' house."

"I'm coming with you," Hermione said determinedly. "Justin and Ron are both going to the Ministry, and I can easily turn time back from there."

Harry had expected Hermione to argue with him. "They're going with me to try and help me find Remus or at least somewhere to hide until it's the right time to head for the Auror Lounge. You can't go to the Ministry and turn back time there because if you do, you might leave a magical signature from using your time-turner. And if you do that, Bones might work out exactly what's gone on. She's already guessed far too much about this whole thing than I'd like."

"But since your pass has gone then it's obvious the Professor has it and he's going to use it," Hermione reminded him. "What if she guesses that?"

"The Professor is going to be using Harry's stolen pass that Bones believes was used by a student so there's no chance of her working it out, unlike with you and that thing," Ron butted in.

At Hermione's fierce glare, just as he had done with Dobby, Justin tried a gentler approach. "Hermione, please listen to Harry. We'll be back as soon as we can."

"I'm not staying behind. I'll turn time back from here and then go to the Ministry with you three," Hermione responded forcefully, Justin's softly softly approach not working on her.

"Hermione, you're staying!" Harry said firmly, his voice a lot more authoritative than Justin's had been. He then did as Justin had after Ron's interruption and changed tactics, softening his voice when he saw a stubborn look settle on Hermione's face. "Hermione, I understand why you want to stay with me, but please do as I ask. Your dad would be heartbroken if anything happened to you. He's already been through enough upheaval as it is without losing you."

Hermione was more than a little irritated by Harry's underhanded ploy but she finally agreed. "Fine, I'll stay behind."

A very thankful Harry pulled Hermione into a hug. "Thank you."

"Please be careful," Hermione pleaded before she kissed Harry. She then wrapped the time-turner's chain around everyone's necks and rotated the hourglass backwards five times.

As Hermione removed the chain, Harry pulled out his wand and cast Tempus, the time of 8.42 a.m. appearing in misty letters. "Good guess." He then kissed her on her cheek. "I'll see you later."

As soon as the trio vanished, Hermione also disappeared, surprising Harry when she reappeared beside him at the arrival point inside the Ministry. "I'm sorry but you're not leaving me behind. If you want to make a scene, then go ahead."

"You know very well I can't do that," Harry said angrily, not really wanting to get into an argument now that they had arrived in the Ministry. "Just stick close to me and keep your head down. I'm the only one Bones mentioned seeing and I'd like to keep it that way."

Smiling, Hermione fell into step with Harry and did exactly as he told her to do.

Two Hours Prior to Execution: 9:30 a.m.

On their way down from Hogwarts, the little group had decided that Harry should wait to locate Remus until the time Amelia had

unwittingly supplied Harry with of what they believed would be Remus' entrance into the Auror Lounge. And so, hidden in a store cupboard, Remus waited patiently, totally unaware that in a similar store cupboard on the floor below, Harry and his friends were doing the same.

Extremely nervous about what Harry was going to do, Justin barked at Ron when he began fidgeting, "We still have two hours before Harry needs to find Remus and make the switch, Ron, so for God's sake keep still!"

"I just want to get it over and done with!" Ron snapped back, as he too was horribly nervous.

"As do I! I wish we had arrived later as being locked in here is driving me mad," Hermione added, before burrowing further into the back of the cupboard as she tried to get comfortable.

"We had to arrive earlier to avoid the tightened security I know that they'll be putting in place," Harry reminded her, having already had to bypass it when he and Remus had arrived to witness Sirius' execution the first time around. "If we'd left it much later we might not have been able to get in."

Ron became even more nervous at the mention of security. "Do you really think we can get Black out?"

"We at least know that we probably succeed in the first part, given what Harry said about Black blurting out Remus' name this morning," Hermione said, having thought long and hard about what was going on while she had been sitting and waiting. "And I know that Harry gets out safely."

Justin raised an eyebrow. "What makes you say that?"

"Because he's already seen Bones in the future," Hermione said.

"I don't understand," Ron said in a confused voice.

Hermione tried to explain her belief in how time-travel worked so that Ron would understand. "Whatever will happen has already happened. We either succeed in getting Black out or we fail but because Harry went with Justin to see Bones in our past although

it's now our future, then he has to do it again, meaning that he gets out safely and, since we met up with him and Justin afterwards in the Professor's rooms, so will you and me."

This was giving Ron a headache and he pointed out what he thought was a rather large problem with Hermione's explanation. "Okay, so we're all going to make it, but if we can't alter what happened, then why are we even here? Harry said that Black was no longer standing behind the screen at the end of the execution, so he must have died, and..."

Hermione interrupted as she continued to try to explain what could have happened. "That doesn't mean Black is dead. Well, it could do if Harry aborted and Black was executed, but it could also mean that Harry succeeded and Black was invisible, which was why he was no longer behind the screen when it was removed."

"Oh," Ron said, finally getting it.

Hermione's words brought home to Harry what he was about to do and he shivered. "I feel cold."

"It's just nerves, I suppose," Hermione told him. "Put your cloak around you."

Harry had almost forgotten about his invisibility cloak that he had shoved into his pocket. Taking it out, he offered it first to Hermione, who refused, before he asked the others in the cupboard if they wanted to join him. Both Justin and Ron declared they were warm enough without it.

Less than five minutes had gone by when Ron started fidgeting again, and Justin wondered if he really was cold despite his earlier denial. "Are you sure you're all right, Ron?"

"I'm okay," Ron tried to reassure Justin, although he knew it was a lie; in truth he felt like vomiting.

Upstairs, Remus was similarly anxious and he had had to take a calming potion to settle his stomach. He would have been far more nervous if he had known that Harry and his friends were downstairs.

Sixty Five Minutes Prior to Execution: 10.25 a.m.

It was almost the time when Bones had told Harry that the Auror Lounge had been accessed and he therefore took Hermione into his arms. "I want you to swear that you'll leave as soon as you can."

Believing that no matter what happened, Harry should be safe because he had already spoken to Bones in the future, Hermione kissed Harry before nodding. "I swear I'll go."

After giving his girlfriend a final hug, Harry held out his hand, anxious to finally be doing something. "Thank you, Justin, Ron."

Justin shook Harry's hand. "Try and come back safely."

Ron did the same. "Yeah, mate or Mum will kill you!"

"Don't worry about me. Just make sure you leave as soon as we get out of here and make sure Hermione goes," Harry cautioned Ron, although he was smiling at Ron's words.

"I will," Ron promised as he disappeared, Hermione casting invisibility spells on everyone but Harry.

Harry checked his wands before whisking his cloak over his entire body, rendering him invisible. "I hope this cloak is big enough to cover Black."

Justin reminded his friend of what he seemed to have forgotten. "It's only a precautionary measure just in case something goes wrong with the invisibility spell and, if it does, I can't see any of your body sticking out from it and I don't think Black's much bigger than you."

"A little silence would be good now," Hermione warned, having checked the time and the three young men quickly stopped talking.

Then, after casting a spell to improve her hearing and listening for sounds of anyone approaching and hearing nothing, Hermione carefully opened the door and looked around. "It's all clear."

The invisible quartet left the cupboard and Harry was relieved when the door to the stairs swung open and he felt, rather than saw, his three companions go by.

The trio who were leaving reached the public floo system without a problem, all three slipping behind a large potted plant to remove their invisibility spells.

On arriving at the floo system, Ron stepped aside and let Hermione floo out first before following her.

When Justin reached Remus' home, he was not entirely surprised to see Hermione out cold and that Ron had his wand out. "I was thinking about doing the same." Justin swung around as Macclesby appeared. "You can't let Hermione leave if she comes round, Macclesby. We're going back to the Ministry to try and help Harry in case he can't find the Professor."

Remus had obviously spoken to Macclesby on his return into the past as the house-elf didn't seem surprised at Justin's words. "You're not supposed to be here."

Ron shrugged and said, "Well, we are and we're going back just in case the Professor or Harry needs help but Harry would kill us if we let Hermione do the same."

Macclesby debated stopping the boys but having no orders from Remus to do so, he decided against it before asking a good question, "Have you put Miss Hermione to sleep?"

"Brilliant idea," Ron said and he aimed his wand at Hermione, who he had only stunned. "Somnio."

The two young men then left via the floo to return to the Ministry to wait for Harry and, hopefully if Harry could find him, Remus, to complete their mission.

Fifty Two Minutes Prior to Execution: 10:38 a.m.

After following the Auror he intended to replace, Remus slipped into the Auror Lounge using Harry's pass, completely unaware that right behind him, hidden by his invisibility cloak, which masked his scent, was Harry.

Harry had also spotted the same Auror wearing civvies heading towards the Lounge and he had suspected that Remus was right behind him. Harry's suspicion had been proved correct when he had

heard an invisible Remus whisper 'Harry James Potter' and the door had swung open for apparently no-one. Harry had then quickly slipped in before the door could close behind him.

Now that he was inside, Harry could see the first Auror they needed to replace was getting changed in the locker area in front of him. Suddenly the Auror collapsed to the ground and Harry watched as the door to a large cupboard at the back of the room was opened.

Still completely unaware that he was being watched, Remus pulled out one of the Auror's hairs and was about to move the Auror into the cupboard when he was hit with a Petrificus spell and then the counter for the invisibility spell, before his attacker released the Petrificus spell from his neck upwards to allow him to speak.

Only then did Harry drop the hood of his cloak. "Hello."

Remus was both surprised and angry. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Helping you," Harry said as he moved Remus' arm so that his wand was across his chest. "And to do that I want you to swear that you won't try and stop me from accompanying you to rescue Black if I release you. If you don't, I swear I'll stun you and shove you in that cupboard with that Auror and carry out the plan you had intended to!"

With the hood of the cloak down, Remus was able to discern Harry's emotions and he could feel how determined Harry was. With time ticking on, Remus had little choice but to agree to Harry's terms. "Very well. I, Remus John Lupin, swear that I will not try and stop you from accompanying me to rescue Sirius if you release me."

As Remus finished speaking the door began to open and Remus therefore hurriedly hissed out, "Throw up your hood."

Panicking somewhat, Harry didn't even think about casting the counterspell to end Remus' captivity and instead he obeyed Remus' command, his head and arm disappearing inside of his cloak just as a contingent of six Aurors came into the room, all withdrawing their wands at once at the sight of Remus standing in between the two rows of lockers. What alarmed Harry the most though was the fact that Amelia was leading the group.

She quickly spotted the fallen Auror. "Sanders, enervate Custer."

The spell didn't work and Amelia scowled at Remus. "Lupin, undo whatever you've done."

"I can't," Remus said truthfully. "I'm unable to move."

After determining that this was the truth, Amelia snapped at Sanders to check out his fallen comrade.

He quickly filled her in on what he believed had happened. "I think we'll need a potion to rouse him. He's been hit with rather a potent sleeping spell from what I can tell. He must have hit Lupin with a Petrificus spell as he went down."

Amelia reinforced the Petrificus spell, still leaving Remus free to speak, before she advanced on him. "I knew something wasn't right when I spoke to Potter this afternoon about the execution and so I decided to withdraw a time-turner and come right back to the moment where I first knew someone had infiltrated the Ministry. I half expected to find Potter here but this makes more sense. You could easily access Professor Snape's stores, acquire a hair from Potter and steal his pass."

She didn't mention that she hadn't made the decision to turn back time though until it was almost far too late to ambush Remus. She had been lucky to locate six Aurors who had not realized that this was a later version of their boss and she had ordered them to accompany her to the Auror Lounge.

When Remus didn't respond, Amelia asked. "Nothing to say?"

"Not really," Remus said, before going on in a sarcastic tone. "Although I might have if I had the faintest idea regarding what you're babbling on about."

"You were planning to help Black escape," Amelia said simply before going on. "So who are your accomplices – the one who was intending to take Partridge's place at the execution and the one who's polyjuiced and has taken your place to accompany Potter to the Death Chamber? Or should I just have my men search for

someone who looks like Potter and also arrest your doppelganger in the Chamber?

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Remus said defiantly.

"I believe you do and the truth will come out under Veritaserum, Lupin."

Amelia then erected a privacy bubble so that she could speak freely, her tone malicious as she said, "And although you'll first be treated to Azkaban yet again, Amicus, both you and your mysterious friends will get the death penalty for this."

Remus smirked at Amelia, aware it would infuriate her. "Do you really think you can make it stick? The death penalty for being caught in the Auror Lounge with an unconscious man and a load of nonsensical theories on your part?"

"You know as well as I do that when I administer Veritaserum you'll sing like an Augury, Lupin, although the only death you'll be foretelling will be your own," Amelia barked out.

"They foretell rain," Remus remarked snottily. "Get it right, Bones."

Her face red, Amelia moved so that she was even closer to Remus. "Whatever, Amicus, you're still going to spill your guts for me and your infuriating little boss won't be able to mount a rescue this time."

Remus was far from cowed by Amelia's response. "As I said, Bones, if you can make it stick."

"You'd better believe I'm going to make it stick."

Amelia then dropped the bubble and placed Remus under arrest. "Remus John Lupin, you are under arrest for attempting to free a convicted killer, attacking an Auror and theft. You will therefore be remanded to Azkaban until your trial where I will be requesting the death penalty." She allowed herself a triumphant smile as she turned to address her men. "Cuff him and take him away."

Next Chapter: The resolution of this chapter, which I've split into two as I'm still working on the second half, will hopefully be posted on Tuesday, but I'm not making any promises.

Chapter 49: To The Rescue!

Well aware of what a mess he had caused, while Amelia had been speaking, Harry had carefully positioned himself so that he was right behind Remus, although he hadn't quite worked out what he could do to save him. As the privacy bubble encapsulated them, Harry could hear every word Amelia said to Remus and he was stunned by the virulence in her voice. He had known that Remus and Amelia didn't get along but it obvious that this wasn't just dislike, it was complete and utter loathing.

As Amelia continued speaking Harry looked around Remus and decided that if they were going to get out, they had to take out as many Aurors as possible all at once, and so Harry turned to face the two Aurors who were flanking Remus before speaking in a lowered voice so that it would carry only to Remus' ears. "I'm going to take out the two Aurors behind you. You pick them off in front. Don't move until I say go. Finite Incantatum."

Although he would have preferred that Harry remain hidden, Remus nevertheless had little choice but to do as Harry had said, and he kept stock still as the spell holding him immobile dropped away.

When Amelia gave the order to lead Remus away, Harry knew it was time to act and he whispered 'go' before he whispered, 'stupefy, stupefy', catching the two Aurors behind him unawares while Remus took out three Aurors in front of him before they had even been aware they were going to be under attack.

Amelia was one of those to escape being taken out and she sent a disarming spell swiftly followed by a blasting spell at Remus, cursing herself internally for not disarming him. It was the most basic rule of being an Auror and in her moment of perceived glory she had forgotten it.

As Remus and the remaining Auror exchanged fire, Harry threw off his cloak and began attacking Amelia for all he was worth, sending blasting spell after blasting spell at her, and within moments he had overpowered her shield and sent her flying, before he disarmed her.

"Potter!" Amelia said angrily as she got to her feet.

"Are you sure about that?" Harry asked, wondering why Amelia hadn't presumed he was his doppelganger.

"Your grandfather was once Head of Auror Division," Amelia revealed, unaware that Remus had already told Harry about his grandparents. "And I've used that cloak once or twice before and I therefore know only too well how rare something like that is. Or are you going to deny you're Potter?"

"No," Harry said softly, aware that the game was up. "I'm not."

Although Amelia knew without doubt that this was Harry, she had no idea if he was his future self or the one from the present time, and she made an educated stab in the dark. "Granger brought you back, didn't she?" She didn't give Harry the opportunity to respond as she went angrily on. "I should have worked it out sooner." She then almost growled in anger as she thought about the earlier interview with Harry. "How did you manage to lie to me at Hogsmeade?"

"I didn't," Harry said. "When we spoke, I was oblivious to the fact that my pass was taken by Remus."

Amelia accepted this but the pass was not the only thing confusing her. "And the polyjuice?"

"I stole it," Remus happily admitted, taking a quick break from obliterating the fallen Aurors.

Amelia turned her attention back to Remus. "And is Ignotus in on this?"

"You know very well that Unspeakable operations can't be discussed with commonplace Aurors," Remus said, aware his description of Amelia's workforce would irritate her.

"You arrogant bastard!"

Harry interrupted, having checked the time. "Our earlier selves should be waiting for an escort by now, so I think you'd better get on with obliterating her. We've got about ten minutes I think."

Amelia now changed her tactics and tried to sway Harry, her voice coaxing, and she even went as far as dropping the use of 'Potter'.

"Don't do this, Harry. Black is as guilty as sin. He tried to kill you and he's not worth risking your life over."

Remus disagreed with her. "Actually we don't believe that attacking Harry was Sirius' choice. Someone's been manipulating him."

"Black admitted to what he'd done," Amelia argued. "I think it's you who's been manipulating the boy, Lupin. Tiberius should never have granted you any form of guardianship over him. You're not fit to take care of a kneazle let alone a vulnerable and impressionable boy like Harry."

The mention of Tiberius Ogden made Harry think back to when he had first met Remus and one of the first things Remus had told him – that Remus and Amelia didn't see eye to eye, and even though it wasn't the time or place, Harry had to ask what this woman had against Remus. "Why don't you like Remus? I know it can't be because he got guardianship over me. You didn't like him before then."

Amelia's face closed off. "That's none of your business."

"I'll tell you," Remus said, having kept his and Amelia's reasons for their mutual dislike private until then as a matter of professional courtesy. However, her treatment of him a few moments earlier had removed any reason for him to be courteous to her and so he told Harry the truth. "My father was engaged to Bones until he met my mother and then Dad dropped Bones like a hot potato."

Amelia reddened and hit out. "Your mother was a whore!"

Remus shrugged. "If it makes you feel better keep telling yourself that. I'd rather believe that Dad realized what a cold, self-centered and vindictive bitch you were and he chose to pick someone who was warm and caring instead."

Amelia revealed she knew more about Remus than he would have liked. "And did Narcissa Malfoy tell you the same thing when she dumped you for Malfoy, Lupin?"

Harry's eyes widened but he remained silent as Remus responded, "No, she told me that she loved me and that she'd always love me; however she couldn't marry me. Did Dad say the same to you?"

The barb driving home, Amelia's face tightened and Harry decided he had better step in and break things up. "Remus, we really haven't got time to argue with her."

Amelia subsequently changed tack yet again and attacked Harry to try and hide her embarrassment. "I'll eventually solve this problem, Potter, and the next time I question you, there will be no reprieve for either of you."

Remus turned his wand on Amelia. "Then I'd better make sure that you don't feel the slightest inclination to follow up on this investigation. Obliviate."

Harry quickly made a suggestion to Remus. "When we were walking to Hogwarts to collect my pass, I overheard her saying to Tonks that she had been intending to take a holiday. I think she should take it."

Remus agreed and so he told Amelia that she would no longer believe that he or Harry or anyone associated with them had had anything to do with the attempted escape, that she would dismiss the Aurors having found no concrete evidence of any breach, and that, after leaving via the floo, she would head home, pack her bags and then send an owl to Aditi, her second in command, telling her that she was going to take a two week holiday.

When he had finished, Remus shoved both the downed Custer and Partridge into the cupboard. "Harry, cloak yourself."

Harry did as Remus said, Remus casting an invisibility spell back on himself before enervating everyone. The two of them subsequently listened as Amelia dismissed the Aurors, reciting almost verbatim what Remus had told her about find nothing before she headed for the floo. As Remus had instructed, the other Aurors left, none of them seeming to notice that they were one man short.

The moment they were alone, Remus made a plea to Harry. "Harry, I know I said you could help but please, just go. I'll cast the Imperius curse on Partridge and use him to get Sirius out."

Harry ignored the entreaty and looked at Remus in disgust, his voice filled with disappointment rather than anger. "You never had any

plans to include me even when we were working things out, did you?"

Remus said differently. "I did originally intend to take you with me but then when Bones' missive arrived, I decided that it was too dangerous for you to be involved and so once you had left with Justin, I changed my plans. And given what's just happened, I believe I was right."

"You'd have found yourself facing off against Bones and six of her men on your own if I hadn't been here," Harry contended. "You know as well as I do that you'd never have had enough time to shove Custer into the cupboard before they got in."

"But I might have had enough time to render myself and him invisible," Remus pointed out. "Something you stopped me from doing."

"Because you deceived me!" Harry almost yelled his response at Remus, anger now replacing his earlier disappointment in Remus.

Remus sighed and placed both hands on Harry's shoulders. "I only deceived you because it would kill me if something happened to you, Harry, and when I originally asked you and your friends to help me I wasn't exactly thinking straight. I should never have done it."

Harry's anger faded under the weight of Remus' admission. "Well, it's too late to worry about that now."

No, it's not," Remus disagreed. "Please, just go."

"I don't think I'm meant to do that. When I met with Bones, she told me that they had discovered two Aurors, not one, had been compromised," Harry said. "That has to mean that you obviously don't use the Imperius Curse on Partridge and that I'm supposed to be here to take his place."

"So you tricked me when you said you'd take my place," Remus noted. "I honestly believed you meant every word."

"At that moment I did," Harry assured him. "I would have done it on my own if you hadn't agreed, but you did and we can do this together."

"I don't want to risk your life to save Sirius," Remus said, wishing Harry would listen to him.

"I'm not going to. Hermione said I'm going to get out safely because we can't change what's happened," Harry said. "I thought you'd know that."

Remus admitted to a breach in his knowledge. "Unlike Hermione I know how a time-turner works but not the temporal laws associated with the use of one. Did she say anything else?"

"Yes, she did," Harry said, before paraphrasing his girlfriend. "She said that because what has happened has already happened, we'll either rescue Black and he's invisible because we put a spell on him, or he's gone from behind the screen because he's dead, and that because I've already seen Bones in the future I have to do so again." Suddenly Harry realized that while he might be safe, Remus could still have a problem. "If she is right though, then we might have a dilemma. You left early to try and avoid me being involved... What if something goes wrong for you again?"

"Then I suspect Bones will get her wish and the wizarding world will be reading about my execution, and I doubt very much that anyone will be making a bid to rescue me if that is the case," Remus remarked in a dry voice.

"I would," Harry said immediately.

Remus shook his head. "No, Harry, you wouldn't. If something goes wrong for me again, then you will walk away and not look back and that's an order. If this is when I'm meant to die, then we can't change it."

"But..."

"No, ifs or buts this time, Harry," Remus said firmly. "And I'm making this an order from a superior officer. If I am compromised again, you will walk away. Do you understand?"

Harry opened his mouth to protest, only to close it again as Remus glared at him. "Okay, but we need to get going."

"Then get dressed in your target's spare set of clothes while I get a hair off him and shove him in the cupboard with his friend," Remus said.

As Harry dressed he asked about something that had been puzzling him. "So tell me, how did you persuade Hermione to help you?"

"I told her that I was going ahead to scout out a hiding place," Remus said, completely unabashed that he had lied to Hermione. "But as soon as we arrived I obliviated her and told her when to return to my rooms. I hoped you wouldn't work out how to use the time-turner if she couldn't remember but you obviously somehow managed, although how you got around your oath escapes me."

"I used Dobby and I also was able to tell Ron and Hermione about the actual execution as well as what Bones had said to me," Harry said, tugging the Auror's spare boots out of the locker. "And then Ron, who sort of knew how time-turners work, told Hermione how to use hers and she guessed at how many turns to make."

"Please tell me that they're not here."

Harry gave Remus a slightly sheepish look. "They were here right up until I tried to locate you. After that they were going to leave."

Remus stared in disbelief at Harry. "Do you really think Hermione would just give up on you like that?"

"I made her swear to leave, and, as I've just told you, she believes I'm going to come out of this safely," Harry reminded Remus.

"And Ron and Justin, what about them?"

"I didn't ask them to swear to go but I entrusted Hermione to their care and I know they'll get her safely out and go with her."

"I hope you're right because we don't have time to find out for certain," Remus said, casting Tempus as he finished speaking. He shook his head, his voice now full of concern. "I really wish you'd just stayed behind."

"But I didn't," Harry said, holding out his hand. "I need the polyjuice potion."

Ten seconds later, Harry found himself sporting a spotty blonde visage, Remus having taken over from Custer, his long red hair flowing down his back. Harry shivered at the cold blue eyes Remus now had. "I think we'd better go. Our earlier selves should be on their way up about now."

Remus agreed and they set off. For Harry, walking up the corridor and moments later passing his and Remus' earlier selves coming the other way with an armed guard was bizarre to say the least. Once they were past them, he turned to Remus. "So what do we do now?"

"Head down to the holding cells," Remus said, already having surreptitiously checked out the area before going into hiding. "It's where Sirius is being held."

"Can't we get him out from there?" Harry asked.

"We've already seen him executed," Remus reminded him. "So if we can't change what has happened as Hermione believes, the answer would be no."

The two then talked quietly as they walked along to the cell area. However, when they arrived at the cells, both men spotted what would have been a major problem with Harry's suggested revision: there were at least twelve Aurors standing outside of Sirius' cell, to say nothing of the four inside of it.

On going in through the open doorway, Harry felt somewhat nauseous as he saw how pale Sirius was. And, as he remembered how aggressively he and Remus were about to deny the man in front of him, Harry's nausea turned to guilt before he told himself that he still wasn't entirely convinced that Sirius was innocent.

All thoughts about guilt and innocence were put on hold though as Amelia Bones turned to face him and Remus. For one moment Harry experienced a moment of fear as he half wondered if she had somehow gotten around Remus' obliviation and this was the later version of her. But her next words proved that it was Amelia from earlier in the day, her time-traveling self obviously not having revealed to this version what was to come.

"Auror Custer, Auror Partridge, you have both volunteered to carry out the final part of the execution. Do you still wish to do so?"

Harry nodded, not trusting his voice, and Remus did the same.

Amelia was not surprised when neither man responded vocally; what they were going to do was far from pleasant. "Very well. I'll just need your signatures on the warrant."

Harry almost signed his real name, nerves overwhelming him and making his hand shake.

Remus didn't feel much better, able to feel Sirius' terror and despair. His guilt swamped him like a tidal wave, and just like Harry, his hand was shaking as he forged an approximation of what he hoped was Custer's signature.

Now that the warrant was complete, Amelia addressed Sirius. "Please turn around."

Sirius turned so that magical restraints could be fitted. As Remus had been able to determine, he was terrified and he had even refused a last meal as he doubted he'd have been able to stomach anything.

Amelia checked the restraints before nodding at Harry and Remus. "You may lead the condemned out."

It was a long walk for Sirius, every instinct demanding he bolt for an exit, panic beginning to engulf him. Suddenly he couldn't stand it any longer and, feeling as though he was going to suffocate from fear, he turned to take flight, only to run into the firm grip of the Aurors behind him, one of whom demanded he keep moving.

Given his brief attempt to flee, four other Aurors now moved to flank Sirius more closely, and Harry stepped closer to one of them as they entered the spinning room as he intended to use him to piggyback his way through security. He had no need though as, unlike when he and Remus had had to endure the spinning room the first time around until Harry had identified them both, this time Amelia prevented the room from beginning its usual nauseating rotation.

"Amelia Bones, Head of BritAD, Security Override Alpha Charlie Foxtrot Six Five Six One. Access the Death Chamber."

As she finished speaking, a door opened at the far end.

When they walked towards the open doorway, Harry wondered how long the spinning room would remain still for. Then remembering Amelia's comment about someone accessing a room they shouldn't have, he suspected that once the door to the Death Chamber closed, the room would reinstate standard security.

Stepping inside of the Death Chamber, Harry could see the earlier version of himself sitting with Remus, his hatred of Sirius easy to see.

Unlike his first time, when Harry had felt only hatred, this time he experience shame when, after being asked if he had anything he wished to say, Sirius debased himself to try to ask for Harry's and Remus' forgiveness, only to be rebuffed by both of them.

It was just as uncomfortable for Remus to watch, and he wanted to weep at the utter desolation he could feel coming from Sirius as his past self repudiated him. He now knew how a man with no hope felt as Sirius literally deflated as the sentence was read out before absolute terror took misery's place as Remus and Harry led Sirius behind the screen when ordered to do so.

Wanting more than anything to make things right and to take away Sirius' fear, Remus whispered softly to him, completely forgetting that he was destined to do it anyway. "Don't be afraid. We're going to get you out. It's Moony."

"Remus?" Sirius blurted out in shock, before he froze, icy cold fingers of dread going down his spine as the Dementor joined them.

Remus withdrew his wand to deal with it, only to start gasping as if he couldn't breathe, before collapsing to his knees, Sirius doing the same.

Next to them, Harry froze in fear as the Dementor leant over Sirius, its decaying, bony hands taking hold of Sirius' face. Suddenly a whispered 'get out' came from Remus and Harry knew he was going

to disobey the order Remus had given him earlier, even though he knew he'd probably get a tongue-lashing for doing so.

Moving swiftly, he withdrew the Auror's stolen wand he was carrying and turned it on the Dementor. Then, using his memory of the first time that Hermione had told him she loved him to bolster him, Harry almost silently incanted, "Expecto Patronum" so that his voice wouldn't carry. As a figure shot out of the wand and chased off the Dementor from his intended prey, Harry gave a tiny gasp and froze in amazement at what he was witnessing. Hearing whispering coming from the archway, Harry turned, expecting to see someone there. There was no-one though, and Harry stood transfixed, before taking a step towards the archway.

Suddenly, Remus' hand grabbed his ankle and Harry came back to himself, aware that they were going to run out of time if he didn't act quickly, he grabbed a pale and sweating Remus by the arm, dragging him to his feet and hissing quietly, "Get up!"

As Remus swayed onto his feet, Harry cast lightening and invisibility spells on Sirius, who was by now completely unconscious, before hauling him over his shoulder, not having time to use the invisibility cloak. It wasn't a moment too soon as the shield between them and the audience was dropped.

After being dismissed by Amelia, who told them to report to medical, Harry then turned and walked out, Remus following. They had just made it into the spinning room when Remus collapsed completely.

11.40 a.m.

An invisible Justin stood in the Atrium, watching for any sign of either of the Aurors who were supposed to have carried out the executions, or of Remus and Harry, if their polyjuice had worn off. After slipping away, he dropped his invisibility spell as he checked his watch yet again to make sure he was right about the time.

On seeing that just over ten minutes had gone by since the execution had been scheduled and no-one had come by, Justin was afraid that despite what Hermione had believed about Harry getting out safely, something must have gone badly wrong. After re-establishing the invisibility spell and then making himself wait for another few minutes with no results, Justin decided to return to the

cupboard, where he had told Ron to stay. The moment he slipped inside, Ron dropped his own invisibility spell.

"Any sign of them?"

Justin dropped his own spell and shook his head. "No, and I'm really worried, Ron. I know Hermione said that they have to gotten out, and she's usually right about things but what if..."

Ron held up his hand. "Don't even go there. It makes my head ache just thinking about it. I suppose we're going to have to go looking for them."

"So do I," Justin said, his stomach feeling rather queasy. "Let's re-establish our invisibility spells and head for the ninth level. When we get there, we'll need to make sure the coast is clear and hold hands when we get in that spinning room that Harry said leads to the Chamber. I don't want us to get separated."

"Neither do I," Ron hurriedly agreed, before he swallowed hard as he thought about the implications of what they were about to do. "Oh Merlin, I am so going to Azkaban for this and Mum will kill me if the Dementors don't."

Justin smiled. "I suspect Harry and Professor Lupin might as well ...I don't mean go to Azkaban ...I mean kill us."

"Who cares, as long as we get them out safely," Ron remarked as he re-established his invisibility spell. "I don't want to use a silencing spell or I'll never know where you are."

"I agree," Justin said and he grabbed Ron's arm. "Put the invisibility spell on me and we'll go."

The two boys crept out of the room after unlocking the door and, once they reached the ninth level, they stealthily made their way along the corridor, Justin's heart in his mouth as he passed a few people he didn't recognize being escorted by two Aurors. He guessed that they had been witnesses at the execution, and his stomach threatened to betray him as his nerves returned full force. Swallowing continually until the urge to vomit had passed, Justin eventually came up to the door that led to the spinning room that Harry had once told them about, Justin and Ron not having been

granted the same luxury Harry had been of an inclusive tour of the facility.

Grasping Justin's hand tightly as they entered the room, Ron prayed the room would pick the door that led to the Death Chamber as they didn't have a pass like Harry's that they could use. Suddenly a door opened and he and Justin were catapulted through the open entrance. Picking himself up off the floor, Ron was relieved to find it empty except for loads and loads of timepieces or so he thought. Just as he was about to suggest to Justin that they leave and try again, a disembodied voice whispered, "Is that you, mate?"

Ron's legs almost gave way with relief as he recognized Harry's voice. "Yeah, mate. How did you know?"

"Your aftershave," Harry said, Ron's aftershave possessing rather distinctive spicy floral tones.

Unsure of what security the Ministry had in place, Justin also made his response as vague as possible in relation to names. "What are you doing in here and is your partner in crime with you?"

"Yes. He's out cold though and at my feet, together with our escapee," Harry responded in a tense voice, showing his anxiety.

Ron then asked, "What happened?"

"We'll talk about it later," Harry said urgently. "Right now we need to get out before the Aurors we polyjuiced are missed, or worse, their bodies found."

"Bodies?" Justin asked in a concerned voice. "Did you kill them?"

"Of course not! They're just unconscious," Harry informed his friend. "And given that we know that Bones is going to find out about them, someone might already be well on their way to coming across them. So if you two would take my partner, I'll take the escapee."

As he had done with the invisibility spell, Harry again used the wand that he had acquired from Partridge, not wishing to leave his usual magical signature. As Harry dealt with Sirius, Justin felt around with his foot, finding who he was looking for, and he renewed the

featherlight charm on the invisible Remus. "He's here." Then, with Ron's help, he heaved Remus up off the floor.

Bolstered by the knowledge that he must have gotten out of the Department of Mysteries without using his pass, Harry held onto his friends as they were initially cast into the wrong room. Eventually they got out safely but by then Harry was sweating with fear. If he could have seen Justin and Ron, he would have seen that they too were in the same state. After removing the invisibility spell and placing Mobilicorpus as well as the slightly less effective disillusionment spell on Sirius so he could at least see a vague impression of him if the light fell correctly, as they entered the stairwell, Harry decided to use his pass to get back into the Lounge. "I think we should head to the Auror Lounge on the sixth level."

"We..." Justin started to say, only for an alarm to begin screeching.

"Shit! They must have found the Aurors. They're going into lockdown," Harry said as he began to hurry up the stairs.

Ron was unable to see Harry but he turned in what he believed to be his general direction. "We need to find another way out."

"I thought you realized," Harry hissed back at his friend as he negotiated the stairs, hoping he wasn't bumping the almost impossible to see Sirius against the wall as he floated him up in front of him. "Lockdown means that everything locks down: the floos, the apparition points, the walk-in exits – everything!"

"Then we're in deep, deep shit without a change of underwear," Justin said, trying to be flippant but instead his tremulous voice revealed how frightened he was.

"Which means that little Miss Know-It-All must be bloody wrong about us all surviving," Ron snapped, his voice sounding slightly tearful, which under the circumstances was hardly surprising. It was also obvious that stress was playing a big part in his comment, as he would never have normally talked about Hermione like that, at least not now they were friends.

"No, she's not and we're all going to get out," Harry barked, although he too was having similar thoughts. Then he noticed the door opening just above them. "Look out!"

Harry pressed himself against the wall, Justin and Ron doing the same, as two Aurors entered from the eighth level and began to head up the stairwell. Harry could feel even more beads of sweat running down the back of his neck making his soggy shirt even damper, and he almost collapsed in relief when the Aurors passed by and headed through the doorway to the ninth level below. From his viewpoint, Harry could see through the closing door that led to the eighth level Atrium that there were a great of deal of Aurors milling around, some of whom were coming their way. "It looks as though we're about to be overrun."

Also having seen what was waiting for them that way, Justin agreed. "We can't go back in there without bumping into an Auror."

"We'll head for the second level," Harry decided. "I'm worried now there might be Aurors coming into the Lounge as well as leaving via it."

Justin gaped although he knew Harry couldn't see him doing so. "Won't that be the level with the most activity apart from this one?"

"Yes, but it's also the level less likely to be overrun by Aurors. Most of them will be out patrolling the other levels as we've just seen," Harry said. "And no-one in their right mind would try to use the floor where Auror Division headquarters are situated to hide in."

"Thank you for telling us that you've gone nuts," Ron said sarcastically.

Once again Harry didn't take his friend's words to heart... he knew that he had to be terrified and he was far being alone in that feeling. "It's our best bet to hide. Now let's go."

Four times the three of them encountered Aurors on the stairwell and each time somehow they managed to avoid them, both Harry and Justin hovering their charges over the hollow in the stairwell so that they couldn't be run into or hit the staircases above their heads. Harry wondered how Remus and Sirius would feel if they ever discovered that he and Justin had risked dropping them seven floors to a possible sticky death on the ground far below.

On entering the second level, Harry again found himself hovering Sirius high in the air. This time though, it was above people's heads, and Harry just hoped that the man wouldn't suddenly come round. Suddenly he heard Ron hiss out his name, being less concerned about using it in such a crowded environment. Harry refrained from swearing as Ron's urgent whisper carried not only to Harry's ears, but to someone else's as well.

A middle-aged graying man in a green robe turned around. "Hurry? Do we have to leave now?"

"Hearing things again, Norton?" an Auror Harry recognized asked.

"I thought I heard someone say hurry," Norton told him, staring around in dismay.

"There's no-one here," Kingsley Shacklebolt said, not even bothering to investigate as Norton was a notorious tippler and had a very nervous disposition, having been tortured by Voldemort during the last war and subsequently taking up a desk job. "It's probably just a drill, Jim. So why don't you take a break until the lockdown is over? If we do have to leave, then I'll come and fetch you."

"I think I will, Shack," Norton said, patting his pocket. "I think I will."

Ron had by now slipped into the empty room and, having guessed why he had called to him, Harry had followed as had Justin. As soon as he stepped into the room, Harry recognized their mistake but by then it was too late as Norton chose to enter the same room, which was the break room for the floor's occupants.

Unaware of what was happening around him, Norton pulled out a flask and took a nip from it, before settling down on a chair.

After lowering Sirius to the ground, Harry drew his wand and whispered, "Somnio", and Norton drifted off to sleep and began snoring rather loudly almost immediately. Only then did Harry whisper in Justin's direction, "If anyone looks in, they won't suspect we're in here."

"Well, it helps that we're invisible, and I doubt they'll hear us over that noise!" Ron winced as Norton let out a loud grunt before resuming his chainsaw snoring.

Harry wished he could cast a silencing spell but if anyone came in it would give them away. "Ignore him. We have to figure a way out."

"I don't know what to suggest," Justin responded, his head aching from stress and fear, and now the noise coming from Norton. None of them spoke for a few moments and then Justin rubbed his forehead again and asked, "What about leaving when the lockdown finishes?"

"Everyone will be checked as they leave," Harry told him, being well aware of the Ministry's protocol for dealing with such an emergency from what Remus had taught him. "And given what's happened here today, I suspect there will be a sweep of the whole building using methods that we won't find particularly pleasant."

"What do you mean?" Justin asked, a small frisson of alarm going through him at Harry's anxious tone of voice.

So Harry explained as much as he knew. "A special team of Aurors will use something similar to Muggle tear gas, which stops you from seeing properly, to carry out the sweep, only this gas kills and the bubblehead charm is ineffective against it."

Ron affirmed this. "Dad said it's only used in extreme cases."

Another alarm began sounding and Justin's heart sped up. "What is that?"

Harry's worst fears were being recognized. "Evacuation signal. Everyone's leaving, so I think we can safely say that we're an extreme case."

He fell silent when the door opened and Kingsley Shacklebolt entered the room, and after some effort, managed to wake Norton. Once the two men had left and the door was shut, Harry tried to rouse both Remus and Sirius, before Justin made a suggestion after a few minutes.

"We need to surrender."

"There must be another way out," Harry said in frustration, not willing to quit after all that they had gone through.

Like Justin, Ron couldn't think of one. "There isn't, so let's just give up. You can say that you and Justin came to see Bones about the meeting; that way at least you won't get into trouble. I'll stay behind with Professor Lupin and try to get him to wake up. If I can, we can head back to the Atrium and try and get out that way."

"I'm not leaving, and I'm definitely not leaving you or anyone else to take the fall for this," Harry said stubbornly. "And besides, I didn't register as I came in to see Bones as a visitor usually would, to say nothing of the fact that I wouldn't have even received the letter yet and that she asked to see me at Hogsmeade. At least I know why now. There's no way anyone could stay in here without any fresh air to breathe."

Aware that Harry was right, Justin desperately looked around the room, suddenly noticing something. "How do you think they get fresh air back in here after they use the bombs?"

"A spell I should think," Harry guessed, this time not sure of the answer.

Justin pointed up at the square high up on the wall and then realized that Harry was unable to see him. Dropping his invisibility spell, Justin pointed upwards again. "What's that?"

Harry quickly identified what Justin had been pointing out. "Ventilation shafts! They must take air from the outside to minimize on the magical power needed to keep things running." Harry made a demand. "Ron, levitate me up."

Dropping his own invisibility spell, Ron did as he was asked, waiting impatiently while Harry examined the grill. "Can we get through?"

Harry judged the size of the opening. "I think so, and I think I know a spell to undo this grill." Harry then aimed his wand at the grill, removing the screws holding it in and taking it out. "Now let me down."

Ron refused. "Get in and I'll levitate Black and Professor Lupin up after I remove their disillusionment spells. You can then levitate me and Justin up."

"I need to get down in order to place this grill somewhere from where I can summon it to reinstall it," Harry explained. "Bones never mentioned this, so I want to leave as little evidence as possible that we were ever here."

Ron therefore cancelled his spell and after a few minutes of pushing and shoving, all five of them were safely inside of the shaft and the grill had been replaced. Justin looked ahead into the blackness and said, "I wish I had a headlamp."

Harry could barely believe what he was hearing. "Were you sleeping in Transfiguration when we were taught how to make a lamp?"

"No, but we're not taught how to make a Muggle headlamp," Justin remarked smartly, but he was embarrassed as he recalled a little too late what the spell was and how it could be adapted.

Harry by now had pulled his tie off and transfigured it into a lamp, placing it on his head. "I'll float my load up and lead the way. You follow with him."

A tense ten minutes later, Ron found himself joining Harry at a dead end. "What now?"

"Look up," Harry instructed. "I can see daylight. Float me up."

Once he reached the top of the shaft, Harry found a much bigger grill and, after kicking it out and emerging into the daylight, he discovered he was on the rooftop of a building. Leaning down into the shaft, he called to Justin, "Place Remus at the bottom of the shaft. I'll levitate him from up here."

Justin did as he was ordered, and, as soon as Remus was out of the way, Harry also did the same to Sirius and Ron, and then it was Justin's turn. And it turned out to be not a moment too soon. Just as he began rising upwards, smoke drifted along to where he had been standing. Justin realized it wasn't going to follow him though – he felt the sizzle of wards as he moved upwards and into the safety of the fresh air.

Collapsing onto the gritty covering of the roof, Justin wiped a shaky hand over his sweaty face. "That was close."

"We're not out of the woods yet," Harry warned him. "We still have to get back to school."

"I wish the Professor was awake," Ron said, his nerves returning full force even though he knew now that they were effectively safe.

"But he's not, so we'll have to deal with Black," Harry said, bending down to grab Sirius' arm. "I'll take him to Macclesby. Wait here."

When he returned with a grumpy Hermione, only Justin was there. "We heard noises and so Ron side-apparated the Professor out of here. I was going to suggest going to the Professor's house but Ron left before I could do so. I think he's probably gone to the Shack. We should get him and then go to Professor's home to floo directly to school."

"We can't," Harry said. "Macclesby said that Remus had given him instructions to lock down the floo once Sirius was safely inside and to take Sirius to Black Lake Cottage. Macclesby won't be opening the floo to Remus' home again until tomorrow morning, although Remus can open it before then if he comes round, so I suppose we should follow Ron."

When they arrived at the Shack, they discovered that Justin had been right about Ron's destination and Hermione was concerned to see Ron leaning over Remus.

"Is he ill?"

"He didn't do so well when the Dementor appeared," Harry said hurriedly. "I thought he should have come to by now." He then began to fish in Remus' pockets and triumphantly pulled out a bar of chocolate. "He said he was going to bring some before he tried to ditch me. Let's try this."

Despite Hermione rubbing the chocolate inside of Remus' mouth, Remus, however, still didn't stir, and Justin was now more than a little worried. "This isn't normal."

Harry thought quickly. "We need to stay hidden here until I know past me has returned to Hogwarts from Hogsmeade with Justin. Then we should head back to the school before we run into ourselves coming here."

Hermione agreed with him, and they settled down to wait, all the time trying to get Remus to rouse but to no avail.

Eventually it was time to go, and Harry pulled out his shrunken broomstick and enlarged it. "Shove Remus on the back and use a spell to stick him to me. It's the only way I can think of getting him back."

Suddenly Remus groaned. "What hit me?" Then without warning, he rolled sideways and threw up. "I really don't feel so good."

"Let's just get you back to school," Harry said, dropping his broomstick to the ground to help Remus sit up with Justin's help. "Our earlier selves should be just about ready to arrive here and I don't want to run into them."

Remus swayed. "I think I need a little help." As Justin steadied him, Remus pulled out his broomstick. "You might want this."

Justin enlarged it. "Harry, I'll take him back. You fly faster than I do so you can take Hermione and then come back for Ron."

After Ron helped Justin get Remus on behind him, Hermione slipped on behind Harry, before Harry invoked invisibility spells on all of them. "Ron, I'll be back to get you in a minute."

Hermione gave a squeal as Harry went far faster than he would normally with his girlfriend behind him, aware that time was running out, particularly as he spotted a blur of people Harry suspected were their earlier selves coming towards them. Then, after Hermione slipped off outside of the school gates and started walking towards the school, Harry shot off a great deal faster to collect Ron.

Unlike Hermione, Ron thoroughly enjoyed the ride back, Harry using the broomstick as the Vengeance and going fast enough to bypass his invisible girlfriend. The group then gathered in Remus' rooms, where Remus was still more than a little groggy. "Sirius?"

"Macclesby has him. He's going to lock down the floo until tomorrow morning as you told him to," Harry said, handing Remus some of the chocolate he still had. "Eat this."

Remus did so and his color improved a little. "I definitely feel awful, so if you don't mind, I'm just going to lie down. I expect Macclesby will contact me at some point to let me know how Sirius is doing. You lot should return to your houses. I don't want Bones to have a reason to return." Harry had had time as they had walked down to the cells to quickly fill Remus in a little more on his interview with the head of BritAD.

Agreeing, the group left, although Justin and Ron were stopped from returning to their houses by the appearance of their girlfriends, the Patil twins. Not wanting to have to think up an excuse why they couldn't spend the rest of the day with them, the two young men left with them.

Hermione turned to Harry. "Do you want to spend the rest of today together?"

"I think I'm going back to sit with Remus," Harry said, although he knew he was disappointing Hermione. "You should head back to Gryffindor."

"But..."

"Please, Hermione. Remus is right about Bones, and like Ron and Justin are going to be, I'd rather you were visible to everyone," Harry said firmly. "Now go."

Harry kissed Hermione quickly before heading back to Remus' rooms. When Remus didn't awake by the time dinner had come and Macclesby had not turned up, Harry helped himself to a sandwich before heading to Hufflepuff. He discovered that Padma had obviously not relinquished Justin or they were still at dinner, and so, exhausted, Harry lay down and quickly fell asleep, not stirring when Justin returned less than an hour later.

Deciding he could talk to his friend in the morning, Justin also got into bed and, feeling almost as tired as his friend, was soon asleep, neither boy rousing when several hours later Ernie joined them.

Next Chapter: Harry gets to talk to Sirius.

Chapter 50: A Painful Memory

The Next Morning

As Harry and Hermione stepped out of the fireplace together, Remus' house-elf, Macclesby, came over and greeted them. "Mister Harry, Miss Hermione. Welcome to Black Lake Cottage. May I fetch you anything?"

Hermione demurred on behalf of both her and Harry, following Harry into the large sitting room, where they both looked around in amazement at all the glass that made up the wall opposite the entrance. Looking out, Hermione could see manicured lawns, several small ponds and a couple of fountains. "This is a cottage?"

Justin, who had already had the tour, grinned at the couple. "It is rather spectacular, isn't it? But Remus said neither Sirius nor its current owner can take the credit for it as their ancestors did all of the work."

Harry was rather impressed, and he stood at the window and stared into the distance. "How far back does it go?"

"Remus said it's nearly two miles to the closest neighbor," Justin responded.

Harry tore his gaze away from the view before asking, "Where is Remus?"

"In with Sirius Black," Ron informed him. "He came out a few minutes ago though to see if you'd arrived before going back in."

As if he had heard, Remus came out of a door on the far wall a few moments later, his eyes puffy and a little red. "Harry, I see you got my note with the floo address, although you're a little late." He plucked a twig out of Hermione's hair. "And I believe I know why."

"And I believe you owe me an apology," Hermione said, although she was red from embarrassment that Remus had figured out that she and Harry had made an unscheduled stop on their way to Black Lake Cottage.

"I do. I'm sorry for taking your memories away and for using you in the manner I did. Memoria Restruo."

Hermione gave a tiny sigh of relief as her lost memories were restored. "Thank you, Professor."

"You're welcome and again I'm sorry." Remus then placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I recall telling you to leave if I was compromised."

"I know," Harry said, readying himself for a tongue-lashing.

Remus instead pulled him into his arms and hugged him. "Thank you for ignoring me and for being so brave." He then kissed Harry on his forehead. "James would have proud of you."

"I agree," a deep rumbling voice said, everyone turning to see that a dark-haired man sporting a goatee and a moustache had come into the room. As Remus had been, it was obvious that this man had also been crying, and he didn't wipe away his tears as headed towards the group, Harry obviously his target. "Harry!"

Harry found himself being hugged rather firmly yet again. When he was released, he smiled a little uncertainly. "Hello."

Sirius finally wiped his wet eyes. "You really do look like James, except for the eyes and the lack of glasses, of course."

"I wear contacts," Harry said automatically, still a little shell-shocked at his reception.

"It suits you," Sirius said, standing staring at Harry's face.

Harry shifted under Sirius' scrutiny and not really knowing what to say, he apologized for what had happened at Hogwarts. "I'm sorry that I tried to kill you."

"Likewise," Sirius said, a rueful smile breaking out on his face. "Let's sit down where we can talk in comfort."

As Remus steered Harry over towards the sofa, Sirius headed over to the drinks cabinet. "Can I make anyone a drink?"

After changing her mind, Hermione opted for juice, the three young men doing the same, and Sirius handed out their drinks, before fixing himself a firewhiskey and Remus a Scotch.

Remus then began. "Now that we're all settled, we should talk about what happened. I already know that Harry came back to help me because he knew from Bones that there had been two Aurors polyjuiced. So why don't we start with why Justin and Ron didn't remain with Hermione at my home when they were supposed to."

"We were frightened that something would go wrong and that you and Harry might need our help," Justin said, having gotten that far in telling Remus before they had reached Remus' home to floo out to Black Lake Cottage, Sirius having keyed them into the wards so that they could gain access to the house via the fireplace.

"And something went big time wrong. If Justin and Ron hadn't come back for us, you, Bl..., Sirius and I would have all died, or at the very least we'd have been caught and probably executed."

Remus now felt vindicated about his wish to change his plan. "It's one of the reasons why I didn't want any of you involved."

"But you'd have died at the hands of the Dementor if we hadn't been involved," Harry pointed out. "You were in no state to take it on and Sirius came close to losing his soul."

Sirius blanched, not having known this, just that Harry had been the one to get him safely out. "What?"

"The Dementor had already brought Remus to his knees and it had taken hold of your face, I think, to kiss you," Harry said, before glancing at Remus. "I was surprised though when you collapsed."

"Even though I've been in a room with a Dementor before, it's never been in such close quarters, and so I didn't expect to react so badly to it."

"Are you all right now?" Sirius asked worriedly.

Remus wasn't entirely and said as much. "I don't know if it had anything to do with the Dementor, but I had some awful nightmares last night about being tortured." Remus shuddered as he thought

about them. "So I didn't get much sleep, but I'm feeling a little better this morning."

"So where did you collapse?" Ron asked, wanting to know more. "I'm guessing from what I saw in the pensieve before we left to go to the Ministry that you must have been the Auror who looked ill."

Sirius also had question. "As I'm here and alive, I know that Harry got us out of the Death Chamber somehow but how? And how did you two boys find us?" "How..."

"Slow down, Sirius," Remus interrupted before Sirius could rattle off any more questions. "To save time and to stop everyone from asking random questions and making things confusing, I think we should start at the beginning."

So Hermione began at the start, explaining what they had done up until the point she, Justin and Ron had left via the floo. "I don't know what happened to Harry though after we left him behind."

Harry took up the reins. "I knew from Bones what time Remus, who I realized had stolen my pass, would be accessing the Auror Lounge, and I'd also spotted one of the Aurors we'd seen go behind the screen for the execution heading for the Lounge. When Remus opened the door, I followed him in but I almost messed things up when I froze Remus in place and made him swear to let me help him."

Remus took over from Harry. "To cut a long story short, Harry helped me to take out six Aurors and Amelia Bones when they came in and found me frozen."

"Harry took out six Aurors and Bones?" Ron asked in awe.

Not wanting Ron to think he was some sort of super being, Harry quickly explained what had happened, although he omitted what Amelia had revealed about Remus' parents and Narcissa Malfoy. "And so thankfully everything went well after that. Amelia released the security in the Department of Mysteries so we didn't need a pass to get in and could simply walk through to escort Sirius into the Death Chamber."

Remus was once again hit with guilt as he thought about what he'd said. "Sirius, I..."

Sirius stopped him. "You've already apologized ten times, Remus, and I've told you that it wasn't your fault." Before Remus could protest, Sirius moved things on. "So what happened after that?"

"I thought it was all going to go smoothly until..."

Remus broke in but not to apologize again; instead he made an observation. "Well, not smoothly exactly. I did think Sirius was going to give the game away when I whispered to him not to be afraid and I identified myself. He made me jump when he yelled my name out loud."

"After a version of you sitting in the gallery had just told me to go to hell, it was a bit of shock to find you obviously polyjuiced as an Auror and telling me you were going to save me," Sirius said in his defense.

"It's just like we heard in the memory," Ron chimed in excitedly, Remus having restored his memories before they had arrived at the Cottage.

"Exactly the same," Remus confirmed. "But it all went wrong when the Dementor came out. I became dizzy and started sweating, before collapsing, and that was when the Dementor attacked Sirius."

Sirius shuddered at the memory. "After my time in Azkaban, just like Remus, I also don't do well around Dementors, and because of my magical nullifying cuffs, I was unable to change into my Animagus form and so I collapsed. That was the last thing I remembered until I awoke here in the early hours of the morning with Macclesby sitting over me."

"I have to be honest, as Remus just pointed out, I was also struggling a little in the Dementor's presence and so, with Remus almost fainting and Sirius collapsing, everything seemed to be falling apart." Harry had truly thought they were going to fail at that point. "Remus told me to leave but I ignored him and decided to try and fight the Dementor instead."

"You used the Patronus charm against it, didn't you?" Justin interjected.

"I did," Harry said, glad that no-one had witnessed his long-hoped for Patronus. If they had, Harry would have had some difficult questions to answer, questions he would have been unable to answer, even to himself, the Patronus taking on a form he had not expected or even understood.

"So you beat me again!" Hermione exclaimed in annoyance.

Ron hushed the girl up. "Hermione, not now! I want to hear what Harry has to say."

Harry smiled at the Gryffindor before continuing. "As I was saying, mercifully the Patronus worked and the Dementor glided away, and so I helped Remus up, put invisibility and featherlight spells on Sirius, and moments later the screen was dropped."

Remus took over when Harry stopped speaking. "I could barely hold myself up and I was terrified that I'd keel over there and then, but I didn't and thankfully we were then dismissed. We only got as far as the spinning room when I finally succumbed."

Aware that Remus would be unable to tell them what had happened after that, Harry yet again took over the storytelling. "When Remus collapsed, I managed to hold onto him and Sirius as the spinning room catapulted us into a side room and I was trying to figure out what to do next when mercifully Justin and Ron arrived."

Justin recognized that this was his cue and he continued where Harry had left off. "Ron and I waited until the execution time had passed and because no-one had come by us to head to the floos to leave, we went searching. We were really lucky to find Harry at our first attempt to locate him, and together we got Remus and Sirius out and back into the main building. Once there, we managed to get to the second level and into an empty room. But then alarms started going off as the place had gone into lockdown."

"And so how did you get out?" Hermione asked, feeling tense and nervous even though everyone was now safe.

Harry filled her in about their close call. "If Justin hadn't been there, I'd never have thought of using the air vents and it would have all been over, although Ron did offer to sacrifice himself so that Justin and I could get out."

"How?" Sirius asked.

Harry explained what Ron had offered to do, earning Ron and Gryffindor some totally illegal points from Remus for his bravery.

Listening to how close to the wire things had gone, Hermione snuggled closer to Harry. "I'm glad I didn't go, I would have panicked."

Harry disagreed. "No, you wouldn't have. You're brilliant, Hermione, and you know it."

Ron made a retching sound at the gentle tone of Harry's voice as well as his words. "Give it a rest, Harry."

Aware that all eyes were now on him, a slightly embarrassed Harry changed the subject. "Remus, are you putting Sirius up? I can't take him to Potter Place, not with Cordie being there, and you've already said it's too risky for him to stay here."

"It should be safe to take him to my home now that I've ensured that Bones won't believe I've got anything to do with Sirius' supposed failed escape effort," Remus said, having already told Sirius what he was going to do. "I'm then going to take him shopping for new clothes later today."

Suddenly Macclesby appeared with a small package, a vial containing a murky fluid and a note in his hand. "This is for you, Master Remus."

Remus took the items from Macclesby. "Thank you. Where did you get this?"

"From Dobby, Master Remus," Macclesby told him, before bowing and vanishing.

"Dobby?" Sirius asked in astonishment. "Please tell me you're not messing around with Narcy again." He sighed. "I should have

guessed when I woke up here, but it didn't click that my cousin might have had something to do with helping me to escape."

The four children all exchanged telling glances as they all put two and two together, and Remus knew the cat had been most definitely let out of the bag. "I tried to keep her involvement in this quiet, but I should have guessed that some mention of Dobby might come up and you'd recognize his name."

"That still doesn't answer my question," Sirius said to Remus.

Harry answered it for him. "Dobby was the house-elf sent with the message that you were supposedly innocent of committing the crimes you had been forced to carry out."

This surprised Sirius. "That's a definite turnaround. The last time I spoke to Narcy she said she never wanted to see me again."

"She told me that you refused to help her leave Voldemort's service," Remus told his friend. "What I couldn't figure out is why?"

"Because it was her bed and I believed she should lie in," Sirius said bluntly.

"She also told me it wasn't her choice to join Voldemort."

"And I didn't believe her," Sirius answered. He met Remus' gaze. "Just as I know that you didn't believe me about what I'd done. So how did Narcy sway you into helping me?"

"Dobby made a pledge that you were innocent, and Narcissa swore an oath to the effect that it was true and that she wasn't leading me into a trap," Remus said. "But in the end it was all down to Harry and Hermione. If they had said no, then it wouldn't have happened."

Sirius weighed up Remus' response before turning to Harry. "Remus has told me that you did this even though you didn't believe I was truly innocent. That was quite a big leap of faith you took by actively pursuing Remus for a man who might not have been innocent."

"But there was a good chance you were innocent and I couldn't let an innocent man die," Harry said. "Nor would I have ever left Remus alone to face what he was going to."

As Harry finished speaking, Sirius held out his hand to Remus. "Wand."

Remus handed over his wand without question and Sirius made several oaths: that he had not betrayed the Potters; that he had not killed the Muggles on the day he had been arrested for the Potters' murders, and as far as he knew Pettigrew had; that it had not been his choice to kill Dudley's caseworker and his secretary or to ever go after Dudley; that he had not killed Virginia Granger or Edmund Finch-Fletchley; that it had not been his choice to kill the Aurors in the Forest on the day he had attacked Harry; and that he would rather have died himself than have killed Harry that day.

Hermione brought up an excellent point. "Then why didn't you kill yourself rather than trying to kill Harry?"

"I can't answer that," Sirius said, Tom's words preventing him from telling her.

"Because our mystery man probably must have prevented him from doing so," Remus interjected. "And yes, I know someone else is involved, Sirius. Narcy let slip about him but not who he was, and I know you obviously can't tell us anything more than you have done already, which is more than enough to prove you really are innocent."

Harry knew this comment was aimed at him and, given the oath that Sirius had just sworn, there could be no argument that Sirius was truly repentant and far from guilty of what he had done. "You could have died if you truly hadn't meant what you said about dying rather than killing me."

"But I did mean it," Sirius said forcefully.

Harry walked over to Sirius and held out his hand, in a gesture similar to the one that Ron had used with him and Hermione years earlier. "I'm sorry I didn't give you a truly fair chance. I'm Harry Potter and I'm pleased to meet you."

Sirius ignored the hand and again drew Harry into a hug, his eyes shining with tears. "Likewise, Harry, and I understand why you didn't want to give me a chance, and I wish that the circumstances had

been different." He set Harry away from him so that he could look into his face. "I can still remember holding you just minutes after you were born and I promised I'd try to be the best godfather I could to you. I'm just sorry that because of these circumstances, I couldn't keep that promise."

Harry glanced over at Remus. "Remus has taken really good care of me and so have the Weasleys. They've made up for what I went through growing up."

"I'm glad." Shaking himself as he felt like crying again, Sirius brought everyone's attention back to the items that Remus had been given. "So what did Narcy send you?"

By now Remus had read the note and his expression was mystified as he looked up. "It's a memory and she said it's meant for you to see but that it might be a good idea for me to stay here while you do. She also said that if you wish to show it to anyone else after you've witnessed it, then you can. Afterwards she said to open the package."

"Then I'd better view the memory," Sirius said lightly, although he found himself more than a little concerned by the cryptic message. "Although I don't have a pensive."

"I'll floo back to Hogwarts and fetch mine," Remus said, before heading for the fireplace to return home and then head to Hogwarts, only to return a short time later.

When he did, Sirius poured the contents of the vial into the pensieve and he then dipped his head. When he emerged a short time later, he was white and shaking. "Remus, you should watch the memory. In fact you can all watch the memory. Please excuse me. I need to be alone."

Remus ignored Sirius' plea to be alone and he followed his friend out, returning a few minutes later, his demeanor brusque. "Sirius wants me to watch the memory, so let's watch the memory."

Harry and the other three children joined Remus as they entered the pensieve, all wondering what they were about to witness.

The Memory

Regulus Black had barely taken two steps out of the bar, only to find a wand tip in his neck. "Who is it?"

A disguised voice answered him, although it was obvious that it was woman. "That doesn't matter. What matters is that you're going to help me to find something."

"And if I refuse?" Regulus asked.

"Then your body will be found by whoever next comes this way."

Regulus had little choice but to acquiesce. "So where are we going?"

"To wherever your precious Master has hidden his Horcrux," the voice ordered.

"What Horcrux?"

The wand was subsequently pushed deeper into Regulus' neck. "If you don't tell me, I swear I'm going to take your head off."

"You're bluffing," Regulus said before the voice spoke one single word, 'Reducto', and a hole was blown through his arm. His attacker also used the opportunity to disarm him.

The feminine voice came again. "Now do you think I'm bluffing?"

Regulus still refused to comply with her earlier request. "I'm not going to tell you anything."

"Reducto!"

This time the woman had moved lower down Regulus' body, blowing a small hole in his hand.

"The next spell is going to be placed slightly to the left."

Visibly gritting his teeth, Regulus summoned a house-elf, which appeared but was patently unable to do anything with Regulus being held hostage. Regulus then gave it an order. "Kreacher, you're to take us to where the Dark Lord took you."

The woman also made a demand, but this time of Regulus. "Before we leave, order the house-elf to obey me as he would you."

Unless he wanted to die, Regulus had little choice, and he did as requested, before Kreacher took both of their arms and transported them to a beach.

"Where is it, Kreacher?"

"It is over that way, Mistress," Kreacher said, not able to refuse to answer.

"I'm going to bleed out," Regulus snapped, his voice filled with pain.

"Then let's make sure you don't." The woman pointed her wand at Regulus' leg and a temporary field dressing applied itself. "Now follow the house-elf."

Regulus followed his house-elf through the water until they entered a cavern, where Kreacher pointed up at the wall.

"The Dark Lord makes blood, Master Regulus."

The woman nodded towards Regulus. "If you wouldn't mind."

Regulus placed his hand against the spot Kreacher had pointed out, wincing as blood was extracted.

When the rock face parted, they all went inside, and the woman looked around, taking care to keep her distance from Regulus. "How do we get across to the island?"

Kreacher hurried over to something and touched it. A clanking sound later, and a boat rose to the surface. All three moved to get inside, the woman sitting opposite Regulus and Kreacher.

Trying to get closer to his Master, Kreacher pointed down. "Bad things in the water."

"Just keep your arms in the boat," Regulus warned, as he too looked over the side of the boat and at the murky water.

The slight bobbing was clearly making Regulus feel sick as he groaned and clamped his hand over his mouth, but he nevertheless persevered and soon was standing on solid ground. When indicated to do so, he made his way to where a stone basin sat. Looking into it, he discovered an opaque green liquid covering a locket. "This is it?"

"Yes, Master."

The woman picked up a shell shaped cup and tried to scoop the liquid out and dump it but the level remained constant. After using a great deal of spells and failing, she came to the only conclusion possible. "I think you are going to have to drink it."

Regulus shook his head. "No."

The woman looked pointedly at Regulus. "Do it or you know what I'll do to you if you don't."

Kreacher became upset. "No, Mistress. Is bad. It hurts. It hurts so bad."

"He will do it," the woman barked out. "And if he stops, then you, Kreacher, will make sure he continues to drink until every drop is gone."

Kreacher was torn and he turned frightened eyes towards Regulus, who ordered the house-elf to do as he was told. "You have to do it, Kreacher." He then picked up a sea-shell shaped cup that the woman had replaced atop the basin. "And if I should falter, then you must force me to drink the potion."

"Master, please, Kreacher cannot do that," Kreacher begged, almost in tears.

"You will do it," Regulus said.

Kreacher began to weep, but he agreed to do as he was told. "Yes, Master."

"You're a good house-elf, Kreacher." Regulus praised him before turning to face the basin. After taking a deep breath, he took a cupful of the liquid and began to drink it.

He didn't get very far before he doubled up in pain and dropped the cup. Kreacher rushed over. "Master, please stop."

"Fill the cup," Regulus ordered. "And make me drink it."

Tears rushing down his cheeks, Kreacher did as he was bidden, and he continued to force-feed his screaming master until the very last drop was gone. As soon as the locket was accessible in the basin, the woman pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and transfigured it into a similar looking locket, wrote a note, which she inserted into the false locket, before dropping it into the bowl to take the place of the one she had taken.

"Stand back, Kreacher."

Kreacher did as he was told and, seconds later, green liquid rushed in and filled up the basin, hiding the fact that they had ever been there.

Regulus looked over at the woman, and it was clear from his next words that he knew what she was going to do. "You're going to leave me to die, aren't you?"

"You deserve it," the woman hissed. "Not all of us freely joined the Dark Lord, did we?"

Regulus didn't deny it. "I believe in what he believes in."

"And yet you betrayed him tonight," the woman pointed out.

"Better that than having my brains sprayed across a dirty alleyway," Regulus countered, his words becoming stilted.

"I'm sorry to do this," the woman said, tears marring her voice as she headed back towards the boat. "But if you leave here alive, I know you'll tell him."

"Let me leave and I give you my word that I won't," Regulus promised, coughing as if he was parched.

The woman hesitated, before stopping. "I'm sorry. I can't do that."

"Then I guess its goodbye," Regulus said, his words even more disjointed as he tried to speak.

"I guess it is," the woman said, her voice halting and definitely upset as she climbed into the boat. "I really do wish it didn't have to be like this."

"It is what it is," Regulus said, before he slowly started to try and drag himself towards the shore, his coughing worsening.

The woman stopped Kreacher from helping his evidently thirsty master. "You will leave here with me and never speak of what happened here to anyone. Do you understand?"

Kreacher had little choice but to obey her. "Yes, Mistress."

The woman turned her back and headed in the direction of the far shore. She gave one last glance as she saw Regulus almost at the water's edge before she headed out of the cavern, jumping slightly as the cavern slammed back to, and she then left the area, Kreacher also vanishing.

Present Time

A pale-faced Sirius was waiting for them when they emerged from the pensieve. "I always thought that You-Know-Who killed my brother. Now I find out that Narcy did it."

None of the children knew what to say, but Remus walked over to his friend. "She must have had a good reason, Sirius, and if that was truly a Horcrux, then she was trying to do what was right. By the way, you might want to try and get used to calling You-Know-Who 'Voldemort' around here; as you may have noticed, we all do."

"I can easily do that," Sirius said, having grown used to calling Voldemort by that name in prison but he had been aware that not everyone was quite so easy going about using his name. "But I always believed that Reg had been killed after he had had a change of heart. Now I have to live with the knowledge that wasn't true." As he had earlier, he shook himself and changed the subject. "I don't really want to talk about Reg though, so let's focus on that package. I'm guessing it contains this Horcrux Narcy was talking about."

"Um, what's a Horcrux?" Hermione asked, never having heard the phrase before.

"A Horcrux is something that is created by murdering someone. In the process, a portion of the murderer's soul is deposited into a vessel; in this case the murderer was Voldemort and the vessel is going to be whatever is in here, the locket I imagine," Remus explained as he carefully placed the package on the table in front of him, before scanning it with his wand. "If that's the locket in there, it's soaked in Dark Magic." He then carefully withdrew the contents of the package, revealing a locket engraved with a large 'S'.

"How do you know for sure it's a Horcrux?" Sirius asked, his voice a little hoarse as he stared down at the locket that had cost his brother his life.

"I don't," Remus admitted. "But given the lengths Voldemort went to hide this, I believe it truly is one."

Ron pointed at the parchment. "Professor Lupin, look."

Everyone looked and noticed that more writing had appeared. Remus picked it up and read it out loud.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news but I do not believe that the locket I have sent to you is the only Horcrux that the Dark Lord created. In fact I destroyed another one myself – Ravenclaw's lost diadem. I had to use Fiendfyre to melt it but I did not wish the same fate to befall the locket, so I am hoping that it can be saved by opening it up, something I have been unable to do.

I also believe that the Dark Lord is seeking or sought out other artifacts belonging to the Founders. Obviously I am not in a position to check the Sword of Gryffindor, but you, Remus, are. The spell to ascertain if the object is a Horcrux is 'Scelus Anima Exorius', and you should flick your wand in a straight line at the object as you incant the spell.

I have one more lead – I suspect Hufflepuff's cup to be another Horcrux, and that it was given to Bella to place in her vault, a vault of which Draco is now the sole heir, and as much as it pains me to write this, my son is loyal to his master and would never help.

As I said when we spoke, I cannot aid you more than this. I have risked my life to give you this much.

Your humble servant,

N

P.S. How do I explain to Draco why the Black family ring isn't his?'

"I never thought about the ring," Sirius said worriedly. "Malfoy has the heir ring, although he wouldn't get the family ring until my will is read out as he isn't my son and direct heir."

"I'll sort something out that acts like a Family ring," Remus said. "I can't however see or remove the heir ring."

"I can remove it and I'd better let you copy my ring. Draco really also should be able to access the Black properties although I will have to tweak the wards to achieve what is necessary," Sirius decided. "And I'll need a doctored will, not my real one. If the real one is declared then I'll have forfeited everything."

"I have a contact in Gringotts – he owes me quite a few favors," Remus said. "Leave it with me."

Hermione, however, was more aghast at the news about the Diadem. "I still can't believe Narcissa Malfoy melted Ravenclaw's Diadem."

"It could never be used again, except for nefarious purposes," Remus said, wanting Hermione to understand the severity of what Voldemort had done.

Harry had a good question. "Why didn't she use the same technique on the locket? If a Horcrux is that bad, she should have destroyed the locket and not tried to save it."

Hermione suspected she knew the answer to this question. "Fiendfyre is extremely dangerous and can get out of control. Throughout the ages lots of casters have been killed trying to use it and Mrs. Malfoy took a chance in using it to destroy the Diadem."

Sirius had by now sat down. "How many Horcruxes are out there, do you think?"

"I don't know," Remus said, also sitting down. "But I have a terrible feeling that it is more than three."

Hermione could see from both men's faces that this was a big deal, and she made things worse with her next words. "What if Voldemort created, say, six? Arithmancy and Runes both state that seven is supposed to be a powerful number, and with six Horcruxes, that would split his soul seven ways."

"He would have to be insane," Remus said, but even as he did, a cold shiver went over him. "And while he might be many things, I would never credit him with being that."

Sirius agreed. "Neither would I."

"Still, when I return to school I need to check the Sword," Remus decided. "And I also need to know what will happen if it is a Horcrux." He then took out his secondary wand. "I think you should all shield yourself. Sirius, get ready to shield me. Use that wand you used earlier."

Sirius still had Remus' main wand and standing opposite Remus, he placed himself between the children and the table and prepared himself. "They're shielding. Let's do this."

Remus aimed his wand at the locket. "Scelus Anima Exorius."

Everyone was more than a little horrified when Harry dropped his wand as the locket began to screech and he began to do the same thing.

As Harry crashed to the ground, Hermione called out his name in panic. "Harry!"

"No!" Remus grabbed Hermione as she dropped her wand and went to kneel by Harry. "Keep away from him."

Everyone backed off, but it was difficult to simply stand by and watch Harry suffer. What was even harder was witnessing

disgusting brown treacle-like ooze coming from his forehead before receding back in.

Moments after it did so, Harry's screams died to a whimper and then there was silence. Sirius nodded. "I think you can touch him now."

Hermione immediately dropped to her knees, stroking Harry's hair. "Harry?"

Harry opened his eyes and groaned, "That hurt."

In tears, Hermione looked over at Remus and stated the obvious. "He's a Horcrux, isn't he?"

Remus slowly nodded. "It would appear so."

As Sirius helped Hermione get Harry to his feet, Ron asked, "How did this happen?"

Justin proffered up a guess. "Something must have happened when Voldemort tried to kill Harry. Somehow his mum's death at Voldemort's hands must have triggered this."

Remus disagreed. "Lily was killed by a simple killing curse. A Horcrux is the product of something much more sinister."

Sirius had an idea of what it could be. "I know Harry's brother, Jamie, vanished that night. What if..." Here he broke off and looked at Harry regretfully. "Sorry, Harry." Then he continued. "What if his body was torn apart just like Voldemort's and it was this that created the Horcrux? It would have been a terrible and violent death."

Remus had to admit that Sirius had offered up an excellent hypothesis. "I do believe you may be right, Sirius. Our problem now though is how to get the soul portion out of Harry. And that means I need to do a little research, as we can't deal with Harry as we would an inanimate object."

Justin swallowed hard. "But essentially the problem is, is that Harry would have to be destroyed to be rid of the Horcrux, isn't it?"

Reluctantly Remus nodded. "I believe so."

Harry was relieved that Hermione was holding him. He felt shaky enough, but learning that he would have to die to be free had made him feel positively dizzy. "If you have to kill me to get rid of the soul fragment, then how am I supposed to defeat Voldemort?"

"I don't know," Remus said. "But, Harry, don't get worrying. We'll find a solution."

Although he was more than a little unnerved by what he had learned, Harry did trust Remus. "I hope so."

Remus checked the time. "I have some things to do, and I hate to cut and run at a moment like this, but I think it best if you four returned to Hogwarts."

"I'm going to check out the library," Hermione decided.

Remus felt about his person and pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill. He then gave the four children permission to access the Restricted Section in the library. "I doubt you'll find anything in the normal area. I'll speak to you all tonight."

Still in something of a daze, Harry suddenly remembered what he wanted to tell Justin and, given his bravery in the Ministry, also Ron. "Remus can I have a word before I go?"

Putting up a privacy bubble, he led Harry to one side. "What is it?"

"I need your permission to tell Justin and Ron about us," Harry said. "Justin knows something is up and I think, after what he's done, Ron deserves to know the truth."

Remus had half-expected this. "It wouldn't be my first choice but given that I'm going to tell Sirius, you can tell them but nobody else." Remus then made the requisite counter-oath so that Harry could reveal what he needed to before he brought up Amelia's discussion. "Thank you for not mentioning my parents and what Bones said about them."

"That's okay," Harry said, although he was curious about Narcissa and he guessed Remus must have known this as he told Harry what he wanted to know without being prompted.

"And thank you for not mentioning Narcissa. What Bones said was true though, and although Narcissa and I dated some time ago things didn't work out between us, and she married Malfoy," Remus told him. "It's how I knew about Dobby. He was a graduation gift from her parents."

"She's older than you, isn't she?"

"Yes, by five years but we got together when she visited Black Lake Cottage when Sirius was staying there during one of his arguments with his parents when he was sixteen. Although I was much younger she actually fell for me and vice versa. We dated in secret for two years and when I turned eighteen, I asked her to marry me but she turned me down, telling me she was going to marry Lucius Malfoy instead. After that we didn't speak again until this morning."

Harry was stunned. "Do you still like her?"

"Good grief, no!" Remus said, smiling a little at the thought of harboring feelings for someone after such a lengthy period. "My feelings for her died out a long time ago and I'd prefer it if you didn't mention it to anyone, although you can share it with Hermione."

"Okay," Harry said, glad that he would have someone with whom to discuss this shocking new revelation.

Remus dropped the privacy bubble. "Off you go then."

Harry bid goodbye to Sirius, the man wrapping him up in a hug before Harry left to rejoin his friends.

The moment they got back, Harry led the way to the secret entrance to Hufflepuff. He then promptly whipped four miniaturized bean bags from his pocket, having anticipated this already, before enlarging them. "We can go to the library later but after what you've both done for me, Sirius and Remus, I've told Remus that I want to tell you something about us. But first I'm going to require an oath from you."

After Justin and Ron had repeated what Harry had asked for, Harry used the same counter-oath as Remus so that if his friend did accidentally slip he wouldn't die.

Ron excitedly leant forward. "So what do you want to tell us?"

"First of all you should know that Remus is an Unspeakable and a bodyguard to me," Harry said, burrowing down into his bean bag after casting a secondary warming spell on it and lighting up the tunnel with the lighthouse spell he had seen the man in the gold mask using during his graveyard encounter. "And I'm an Unspeakable as well."

Justin's mouth fell open in shock. "No wonder you said you would be better than us at fighting your way out of the Ministry."

"I wanted to tell you, but I had sworn an oath to Remus that I couldn't," Harry said. "And when I asked if I could tell you before, I was refused, although I'm still not sure if Ignotus would be happy with me telling you now."

Any hurt feelings were assuaged by Harry's comment, and Justin smiled at his best friend. "That's okay. So tell me everything you know."

So Harry began...

River Dene

Once Harry had left, Remus gathered up his pensieve and the locket. "I think you should reinstate the original wards on this house and that we should go to my home."

Just as Harry had been astonished by Black Lake Cottage, so was Sirius by Remus' home. "You've come up in the world. I was expecting a bedsit."

Remus grinned. "Thanks for your confidence. But my current job does pay well."

Sirius gave Remus a look of disbelief. "Teachers' wages are notoriously bad. It's only the food and board that makes teaching worthwhile."

"I'm not actually really a teacher," Remus confessed. "I took up the position to try and protect Harry. Before I took up teaching, I was actually a detective as far as everyone was concerned, although as you might guess, my true job is a little more secretive than that."

Sirius grinned at his friend and made a frivolous guess. "Don't tell me, you're an Unspeakable."

"I am," Remus said.

Sirius barked out a laugh. "Pull the other one."

Remus headed out of the room and returned a few minutes later with a cloak. "Put it on and put up the hood."

Sirius did as he was told. "So?"

Remus tugged down the hood easily. "Now it's my turn... if you could give me the cloak back."

Sirius handed it back over and watched as Remus put it on. "I suppose I have to try and take down the hood."

"You do," Remus said, well aware of how different his voice would sound.

Sirius hesitated at the sound of the deep and unfamiliar voice. "Nice trick."

"It's no trick, Sirius," Remus said. "Now try and remove the hood."

Sirius tugged and tugged but to no avail. "How did you do that?"

Remus handed over a card. "Tap it."

Sirius did, and Remus' credentials appeared together with an unusual cross shaped watermark, one that Sirius knew only Unspeakables were credited with. "Merlin!"

Remus lowered his hood. "As you can see, I'm a bona fide Unspeakable, although strictly speaking, I'd be in deep shit if my boss ever discovered that I had told you that."

"I think you'd be in deeper shit for breaking me out," Sirius commented correctly.

"Bearing that in mind, I have a few favors to call in," Remus said, before putting his hood back up and taking back his card. He withdrew a vial "I'll need a sample of blood." After Sirius acquiesced, Remus said, "I'll be back in an hour. Make yourself at home."

Sirius was asleep when Remus returned but he roused when a foot nudged him. "You did say make yourself at home."

"I did," Remus said, and he handed over a small box. "Here you go."

"What's this for?" Sirius asked as he took a plain silver band out of the box.

"Slip it on, think about how you want to look and then tap the ring twice," Remus instructed.

After conjuring up a mirror, Sirius did as Remus had told him, his hair lightening to a very dark blonde and his soft gray eyes becoming bright blue. He then shortened his nose slightly, made his cheekbones slightly more angular and his lips fuller before turning to Remus. "What do you think?"

"Ditch the facial hair," Remus suggested.

Sirius liked his goatee but did as Remus had recommended. "It looks odd."

"It will do for a while I should think," Remus said, also finding it strange to look at his altered friend. "That ring is a form of polyjuice but it's locked into place until the user taps the ring again and decides that he wants to revert to his usual self. I thought it best to take you out looking like someone different without the hassles of standard polyjuice."

"So does this mean..." Sirius began.

Remus stopped him in his tracks. "No, Sirius, you can't go out into the wizarding world. It's too dangerous. While your captor is still alive, not only are you at risk from the Imperius potion I've detected in your blood, but..."

"But everyone thinks I'm dead," Sirius tried to argue.

"And I'd prefer for them to continue to think that," Remus said forcefully. "You have to stay here, Sirius."

Sirius shook his head. "I know that I'm taking a risk but I can't just sit around, Remus. It would feel as though I'm back in Azkaban."

"I understand that but why do you even need to leave the house?"

"I'd like to go back to my original intended job," Sirius revealed.

Remus could feel Sirius' resolve. "You don't even know if you passed your exams."

"You do though, don't you?"

Remus held out a certificate that had Sirius' name on it. "I do, and you finished at the top of your class. You were supposed to have been offered a permanent place at St. Mungo's. And before you ask, no, you can't go back there."

"How about somewhere smaller, like St. Jude's or Dovecote?" Sirius asked. "It's not as if anyone would recognize me, and you know as well as I do that I'm qualified."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I'll blunder on myself," Sirius threatened before softening. "Remus, I know how much you and Harry have risked to help me but please, I'm begging you, don't make me sit around doing nothing. It would kill me."

Remus knew he was going to capitulate. "Promise me that you won't do anything stupid and I'll see what I can do about setting you up with a false identity that can't be traced."

Sirius grabbed his friend and hugged him. "Thank you."

"I haven't done it yet," Remus reminded him.

"But you will," Sirius said confidently.

"We'll talk again in a few weeks," Remus promised. "But for now, we're going to go shopping."

"Then I need to make one trip to Gringotts," Sirius said. "I need money."

"And you're supposed to be dead. I have access to Harry's money," Remus responded to counter Sirius' argument. "You can make a note of everything you spend and pay him back when you can finally access your account at Gringotts."

Sirius relented and he let Remus disapparate them out of the building, surprised when they reappeared in what was obviously a Muggle back alley. "We're going shopping in the Muggle world?"

"I'd rather not open myself up to scrutiny if I'm seen with you, even in disguise, and nobody is likely to recognize you here," Remus said as he walked out of the alleyway. "Although your face was splashed over the Muggle papers, you're certainly don't look anything like Sirius Black anymore with that disguise."

Sirius was worse than a woman when it came to shopping, and he grinned at his friend in excitement. "Then let's go shopping."

Four hours passed before they returned, Remus glad he was able to shrink their parcels as Sirius had gone wild. "You like to shop, don't you?"

"I always have," Sirius said. He then became somber. "Remus, you risked everything for me and so thank you."

"You should also thank Narcy," Remus said, as he dropped the tiny packages onto the sofa. "If she hadn't sent Dobby when she did, it would have been too late."

Sirius arched an eyebrow at his friend. "I'm still shocked that you agreed to help her. The last time you two were together I thought you were going to kill each other."

Remus sighed heavily. "It's been a long time since she dumped me, Sirius."

"Despite your age and blood differences, I still expected it to work," Sirius admitted to his friend – he had been the one person that Remus had confided in about the forbidden relationship, and before

Narcissa had dumped Remus, Sirius had run interference to allow the oddball couple time together. "I really thought Narcy would have been strong enough to defy her parents."

"She obviously didn't love me enough," Remus said, his mind on how terrible he had felt after Narcissa had turned down his marriage proposal and told him she was marrying Lucius. "Anyway, it's all water under the bridge and we've both moved on since then. I certainly don't hold any lingering feelings for her."

"But you're obviously still single," Sirius stated. "Why is that, if you still don't have feelings for Narcy?"

"I've not met the right person," Remus truthfully told his friend. "I thought I had with my last girlfriend but she also dumped me because I kept letting her down."

"That's not like you."

Remus pointed to his cloak. "It is when you're an Unspeakable."

Sirius burst out laughing. "Come on, Remus. You don't really expect me to believe that you'd let a girl down over a job."

"This is more than a job for me," Remus said, wanting Sirius to understand how he felt about his work. "I love what I do, although I have to admit it can be trying on the relationship front."

Sirius noticed Remus look at his watch. "Do you really have to go?"

Remus sighed and gave in. "Fine, but only until curfew at Hogwarts."

"Don't forget about Malfoy," Sirius said.

"I've left a message for my contact at Gringotts and I can get you a ring to replace the Black Family ring that will vanish upon the wearer slipping it on," Remus promised. "In the meantime I think we should talk."

"Then let's talk, particularly about a certain Unspeakable who came to question me when I was in Azkaban..."

It was almost dawn by the time Remus returned to Hogwarts, using the Hufflepuff passageway to cut off some journey time to enter the school and return unnoticed to his rooms. As he bypassed the bean bags that Harry had not bothered to take back to his dormitory, Remus guessed that Harry had told his friends the truth about who he had been. Heading up the passageway, he groaned as he realized he would have less than an hour before breakfast. After getting back to his rooms and showering, Remus grabbed a pepper-up potion, aware that he would feel more than a little terrible by the end of the day, and then set off for the Great Hall for some breakfast.

Next chapter: Harry gains a new ally; Hermione decides to take her relationship with Harry to the next level

Chapter 51: A New Ally

Ministry of Magic Yule Ball – December 23rd 1996

Harry glanced across the room at a girl who looked vaguely familiar. "I'm sure I know her. Do either of you know who she is?"

Hermione and Luna followed Harry's gaze over to where a dowdy looking girl in spectacles was hopping from one foot to the other, Hermione responding, "She's Georgiana Simon, one of the girls who were part of the Beauxbatons contingent from last year when the Triwizard Tournament was held."

"I thought I recognized her," Harry said, before glaring at a group of girls who were laughing. "She doesn't exactly look comfortable."

Luna frowned as a ripple of laughter carried across the room. "That's probably because she knows that those girls are making fun of her. Let's go."

Harry followed the two girls across the room to where Hermione greeted the frumpy, bespectacled girl. "Bonjour, Mademoiselle Simon."

Having stayed in Gryffindor during her time at Hogwarts, Georgiana was relieved to see a friendly face. "Bonjour, Mademoiselle Granger. Are you well?"

"I am, thank you," Hermione said, also switching to English. "Mademoiselle Simon, this, as you already know, is Harry Potter, and this is our friend, Luna Lovegood. Luna, Harry, I'd like to introduce you to Georgiana Simon. She was one of the possible contestants for the Tournament and she stayed in Gryffindor in my dormitory."

This surprised Harry beyond belief. To look at her, he had thought she was simply one of the supporters. But being a polite boy, he offered his commiserations. "I'm sorry you didn't get to take part."

"T-T-Thank you," Georgiana stuttered nervously, not meeting Harry's eyes. "You were very good, M-M-Monsieur."

Harry couldn't quite hear what one of the girls to their left had said at that moment but judging from the hurt look that crossed Georgiana's face, Harry had the feeling that Georgiana had heard and that whatever it was, it was probably unkind.

Luna rolled her eyes towards the dance floor and Harry got the message. "Would you like to dance?"

Georgiana glanced at Hermione, who she knew was dating Harry. When Hermione smiled encouragingly, Georgiana agreed, wanting to escape from standing so close to the giggling horde of girls. "P-p-please."

Harry led Georgiana as far away from the girls as he could get. "Are you here alone?"

"I am with m-m-my f-f-father." Georgiana glanced down the room and pointed. "He is there."

Harry noticed a man with his back to the room talking to a guest. "Is your mother here as well?"

"Non," Georgiana said, unthinkingly using French, before blushing and looking down at the floor. "She does not l-l-like them."

Harry was with the girl's mother on the subject of parties. "And are you enjoying yourself?"

Georgiana shook her head. "Non."

"Then perhaps you would prefer it if I took you over to your father," Harry suggested as the music ended. "Tell him you wish to go."

"M-m-merci," Georgiana said, deciding that Harry's suggestion was rather a good idea.

Harry politely held out his arm and led the girl in the direction of the man she had pointed out as her father. When he reached the fair-haired man, who was now talking with another guest, Harry waited politely for him to finish his conversation before addressing him. "Good evening, Sir."

Destin Simon held out his hand and spoke in English with only a faint trace of a French accent. "Good evening, Monsieur Potter. I am a little surprised to see you are escorting my daughter. I was not aware that you knew each other that well."

Harry explained. "My friend, Hermione Granger, introduced her to me, and Miss Simon said she was here with you."

Destin could see that his daughter was obviously feeling very uncomfortable. "Thank you for returning her." He then made up for his omission. "I apologize. I should have introduced myself. I am Destin Simon."

Harry frowned, recognizing the name, but unable to recall who the man was, he simply acknowledged Destin's introduction. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Sir."

"Are you enjoying yourself, Monsieur Potter?" Destin asked, echoing Harry's own question to Georgiana.

"Not really, Sir," Harry admitted, having had to attend because Arthur Weasley was duty bound to attend as head of a Ministry department, and Molly refused to leave Harry at home with the twins, although both boys had promised they'd take care of him. Accordingly Hermione had also been roped into attending with Harry, not having returned to Sydney for Christmas since her father was in London, and when she had been asked if she wanted to go, Luna had jumped at the chance to spend time with her friends. Justin and Ron had both joined the Patil twins that evening at the girls' home, something to which neither boy had been looking forward.

"Why not?" Destin enquired. "Most young people your age do."

"I don't like being stared at," Harry said, aware of the same giggling girls standing not twenty feet away from him, and again they were obviously talking about him or Georgiana, or both. "As far as I'm concerned I'm just a normal boy, just like everyone else."

"Amelia told me that you felt that way, but up until now I was not quite sure whether to believe her," Destin revealed.

It was then that Harry realized who Destin was, and he exclaimed, "You're the head of French Auror Division!"

"I am," Destin confirmed, smiling. "And as such, Amelia has told me a great deal about you, Monsieur Potter."

Harry wanted to squirm under Destin's knowing glance, wondering exactly what the woman had said. "I'm afraid I can't say the same about you, Sir." Expecting a response, Harry was surprised when, all at once Destin stiffened and his head snapped round. Wondering what was up, Harry also turned around, but the only new arrival that Harry could see was Remus. He was late arriving as he had dropped into his office to sort out a few things and catch up on his post before joining them. Harry waved to Remus and he headed over.

When Remus reached them, Harry introduced him to Destin Simon. "This is one of my teachers and one of my guardians, Remus Lupin."

"Destin Simon," Destin identified himself, shaking hands with Remus. "And this is my daughter, Georgiana."

After he had shook hands with Destin, Remus kept his handshake brief with Georgiana. "I'm pleased to meet you both, but if you will excuse us, I need to talk to Harry." Not giving Harry a chance to say anything, Remus hustled Harry off towards where Molly and Arthur were sitting.

Once there, Harry turned on Remus. "That was really rude, Remus!"

"Please all come with me," Remus ordered and the group headed towards a door that led to the outside. Once he was satisfied that he was far enough away, he erected a privacy bubble and finally responded to Harry's comment. "I know I was rude, Harry. But Destin Simon is a werewolf, and I'm not entirely sure what his intentions were towards you."

"You couldn't read him?" Molly immediately asked.

"I could feel he was very interested," Remus revealed, "which was enough for me to want Harry away from him."

"But he's head of French Auror Division," Arthur informed him, being well aware of who the blonde man was.

"I know who he is," Remus said. "But that still doesn't mean he can be trusted, particularly as I have no idea what he wanted."

"Well, he must want something since he's coming this way," Molly noted, before Harry could say that he had approached Destin and not the other way around.

Remus dropped the privacy bubble and turned to face his fellow werewolf. "Monsieur Simon, is there something I can do for you?"

"I would like to talk privately to you, Monsieur Lupin," Destin said, "if I may."

"Let's talk out here," Remus said before turning to the others. "Go back inside; it's cold out here. I'll be back shortly."

Trusting Remus' judgment, and noting that he stood a good five inches over Destin, Arthur decided to do as Remus said, and he shepherded his wife and Harry back inside.

Once alone, Destin acknowledged what Remus had already guessed. "You know what I am, do you not, Monsieur?"

"I do," Remus owned. "And I'd say that you're also aware of what I am."

"I am," Destin acknowledged. "And I am rather surprised that Amelia has never mentioned that you are a werewolf, Monsieur, especially since I am aware that the British wizarding world is rather uptight about dark creatures."

"And I'm equally aware that despite the French wizarding world's more liberal approach to them, you have not made it public that the ministre de la Défense is a werewolf," Remus countered, his stance as stiff as Destin's.

Destin nodded towards the trees. "I think we should take this conversation away from the main house."

"I agree," Remus said as he fell into step with Destin. Feeling the tension in the air, Remus almost expected Destin to attack him at

any moment, and he therefore voiced his inner thoughts. "So, are we going to fight or talk when we get to wherever we're going?"

Like Remus, Destin was well aware that two male werewolves in one location was usually bad news. "I would prefer a more civilized approach as I do not wish to explain to your charge why I left your bloody body lying out here."

Remus bristled visibly and he immediately went on the offensive. "Don't be so certain of your skills, Monsieur."

Destin growled low in his throat. "You would be surprised at my skills."

"I doubt it," Remus said in a confrontational voice. "But if we're going to fight, I think a venue more suitable than a party at which we're guests might be a good idea."

Destin forced himself to ignore his more primitive side, which was howling for him to try and rip Remus apart. "I apologize. My attitude was uncalled for and totally inappropriate."

Remus also forced himself to ignore the urge to attack this man. "And I shouldn't have responded as I did."

Destin smiled deprecatingly. "I do believe that it is in our nature to be confrontational."

"Which is why I have to admit that I'm surprised you approached me," Remus said. "So what do you want?"

Tamping down the wolf in him at Remus' still somewhat antagonistic tone, Destin adopted a pleasant voice and harked back to his earlier comment. "First of all, I would like to know whether Amelia or the Weasleys are aware of what you are, especially given that you are a guardian to Harry Potter as well as a teacher at Hogwarts."

Remus thought the question somewhat invasive but he answered honestly anyway. "The Weasleys are but Bones is not. If she was, I'd have to register with the Ministry, my guardianship of Harry would be revoked and I wouldn't be allowed to teach at Hogwarts."

"What about the safety of the children?" Destin asked, ducking under a bush to step into a hollow strewn with fallen tree stumps.

Remus explained about the Whomping Willow. "...and I have access to Wolfsbane. If I didn't, then I'd remove myself from the premises entirely."

"I am glad to hear it considering that my daughter was once a guest at Hogwarts," Destin said.

"I'm well aware of that fact," Remus acknowledged. "And now I have answered your questions, perhaps you would do me the courtesy of returning the favor."

"I have a cell in the basement of my home and like you I also use Wolfsbane," Destin said. "My family is also never at home when I change, as I would rather not take a chance with their lives should something untoward happen."

Remus was hit with a wave of fierce love as Destin mentioned his family, but it wasn't Destin's family that Remus was interested in. "So does anyone at the French Ministry know of your condition?"

"Just my guérisseur, Franco de Blanc," Destin named his most trusted colleague and friend, before realizing that Remus might not understand. "He is my healer." He then went on. "I expect that Flitwick knows of your condition."

"Yes," Remus said shortly, having been entirely honest with Filius, who had been more than understanding.

"Did Dumbledore know?" Destin asked, prying deeper.

"He did, as did McGonagall. It was Dumbledore who had the Whomping Willow planted when I attended Hogwarts as a boy," Remus informed Destin.

Destin was horrified by the implications of Remus' admission. "You were bitten as a child?"

"Yes," Remus said, and he turned the question on Destin. "You?"

"I was attacked during my very first outing as an Auror." Destin shivered as he remembered the night his life had changed forever. "Franco spotted the bite and agreed to keep it quiet as a favor to my father, who was his best friend."

"Thank you for telling me." Remus then turned to the reason Destin had sought him out. "So, personal matters aside, I gather that you wished to talk to me about Harry. As you have already spoken to him, why did you not bring him out here rather than asking to speak to me?"

Destin could feel Remus' suspicion. "You will be able to detect if I am lying or untrustworthy; Monsieur Potter does not have that ability, and I doubt that neither you nor the Weasleys would have let me bring him out here alone."

"True. So what do you want to talk about?" Remus asked, now that Destin had addressed one of his concerns.

Destin told him. "I want to talk about offering my help."

Remus frowned. "I know you are the ministre de la Défense but what makes you think you can help Harry in any way?"

"I do not know if you aware but there are rumblings that Voldemort has returned and that he has been recruiting in France," Destin said, passing on what his operatives had so far been able to discover. "And, as the ministre de la Défense, I am aware of the prophecy that pertains to Monsieur Potter and Voldemort."

Remus was not exactly surprised to hear this. "How do you know that I also know of this prophecy?"

"I did not," Destin admitted. "But I can tell that you do now, and I am also certain that you also know that Amelia has refused to assist Monsieur Potter in any way unless there is a threat to the security of BritAD. However, she is refusing to tell me why."

"I do know," Remus said, aware that Destin would know he was lying if he said differently. "But I'm afraid that I'm not at liberty to disclose Bones' reasons."

"I can assume that Monsieur Potter must have done something pretty unpleasant if Amelia is refusing to aid him," Destin surmised. "But I am not her, and I believe it is important that everything be done to bring Voldemort down before he does become a threat to BritAD or to my own men."

Remus eyed Destin warily. "What are you proposing?"

"I believe that Amelia was wrong to terminate Monsieur Potter's training, and I would therefore like to offer a continuance," Destin said.

Remus refused. "I'm afraid I doubt Harry will want that, and so I have to say no to your kind offer."

Destin was more than a little annoyed that his offer had been rejected without consulting Harry. "Monsieur Lupin, as a history teacher, I am sure that you are well aware that Voldemort had forays into France and Germany in the last war, and I am afraid that he will do so again but this time with more force, including attacking Hogwarts because of Monsieur Potter."

"I agree with what you're saying," Remus said, not wanting Destin to get the wrong idea about his refusal. "But I won't let anyone use Harry as a weapon."

Destin was shocked. "You think I make this offer out of the wish to forge a weapon?"

"It did occur to me, yes," Remus said, although he was beginning to doubt that Destin had now done that.

"I admit that Monsieur Potter is probably our only chance of defeating Voldemort but I do not wish the boy to be left defenseless, which is what I believe Amelia has done to him," Destin said in his defense. "He needs my help, Monsieur Lupin, whether you like it or not."

"I haven't left Harry defenseless," Remus reluctantly admitted. "I've been training him myself."

"But you are not an Auror," Destin pointed out, unaware of what Remus really was. "I do not believe you can train him to his full potential."

"Then perhaps we should ask for Harry's opinion," Remus suggested, not willing to go much further without Harry's involvement.

A short time later, Harry was outside, as was Arthur Weasley. "Monsieur Simon, Remus has told me what you're offering, and even though I understand you mean well, I'm happy with what Remus is teaching me."

Destin could feel absolute faith coming Harry. "In that case, I will make a different offer. No matter what Amelia's stance is, I still want to offer you a secondary source of help. This ribbon is permanently impregnated with Georgiana's scent, and if you should ever be in need of aid, then make sure that whoever needs my help is bearing it."

"Thank you," Harry said as he took it and slipped it into his pocket. He then asked a question. "Do you really think that Voldemort will attack Hogwarts first?"

"I see Monsieur Lupin has filled you in our talk," Destin said. "And..."

It was over an hour later when the quartet returned to the house, chatting as though they had known each other all of their lives. Destin could see Hermione heading their way. "I believe the young lady is worried about you."

Remus had felt Hermione's concern the moment he entered the ballroom. "She'll relax now that Harry is back."

Harry shook hands with Destin. "Thank you, Sir."

Arthur bid Destin goodnight and followed after Harry. Destin held out his hand. "I wish you well, Remus. Do not forget, the offer to aid Harry is always open, as is my offer to help train him you should you need it."

"I appreciate the offer, Destin." Remus shook hands as did Arthur, before walking off to join the other Weasleys, Luna, Harry and Hermione.

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Harry looked around the tidy house. "I'm surprised that Cordie left us here alone like this."

"Not as surprised as I was when I found out she was going to dinner with Daddy again! This is the sixth time in two weeks." Hermione headed into the kitchen to get herself a drink, the others following.

Justin decided to have sparkling water, as did Padma, Ron and Parvati, before sharing his opinion. "I know Mum really likes him."

Harry was not so surprised. "Remus said that they've been writing to each other ever since Lester moved to Sydney. Although I did think it was more to do with Hermione than anything else."

"I think it's really romantic," Luna said, beaming brightly at the group, before she made a confession. "Although I never saw it coming."

"You can't see everything," Harry said. "And with Remus also out on a date, I think it's nice for us lot to get the house to ourselves."

"Even so, I'm still surprised that there aren't any adults remaining behind," Luna said, taking out some orange juice out of the cooler.

Ron grinned. "I think Mum was rather torn."

"I'm glad she's gone with Uncle Arthur to see Charlie," Harry said, taking out a diet coke. "But she did leave me with a portkey and a warning."

"Ha, that's nothing," Parvati declared as she headed into the sitting room and sat down next to her boyfriend. "Padma and I had to practically swear an oath to Daddy that we'd behave and that if Ron or Justin tried anything, we'd head straight home."

Luna giggled. "I think that Hippogriff has long bolted."

A smiling Ron tugged Parvati onto his lap. "I was surprised when he actually agreed to let you stay at all."

"I told him that we weren't actually staying with you or Justin but with Harry Potter. Then Daddy almost fell over himself in allowing us to stay," Padma said, grinning. She then apologized to Harry. "Sorry, he's still gaga about you even though I've tried to explain that you're just a normal person."

Harry gave her a warm smile. "Thanks."

Neville flopped onto the sofa. "I just wish Amelia had let Susan come. I'm really missing her."

Amelia had refused pointblank to let her niece stay at Harry's home, her discontent at Harry's subterfuge still very much alive. Harry was saddened for Susan but given what had happened between him and Amelia, even though Amelia couldn't remember a good part of it, Harry was a little relieved that Amelia had no excuse to simply drop by.

Suddenly a loud bang sounded outside of the house. Shooting to his feet, Harry's wand flew into his hand. "Stay here. I'll go look and see what it is."

Hermione scowled. "I don't think so." She pulled out her own wand and joined Harry at the window, where he was peering outside. "I can't see anything."

The other children also joined them, their wands out as well, Padma trying to peer into the darkness. "Neither can I."

"It was probably just..." Hermione didn't finish her sentence as another loud bang, this time accompanied by a flutter of sparkling light, sounded off. "...fireworks."

Luna straightened up, her face taking on a look of awe and wonder. "They're so pretty!"

Parvati was also a big fan of fireworks, and she therefore joined Luna to watch the display. "I didn't realize that Muggles had fireworks."

"We have some brilliant fireworks," Justin said, and then he noticed how pale Hermione had gone. "Are you okay, Hermione?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't like fireworks that much."

"Why not?" Luna asked in an incredulous voice, turning away from the window for a moment. "Everyone likes fireworks."

"I don't." Hermione's face darkened. "Daddy took me to a display when I was four. I ended up being burnt by a stray firework when he got too close with me."

Harry put his arm around his girlfriend. "Let's go into another room then."

"I'm going to stay and watch the fireworks," Luna said, her attention caught by another loud bang and a shower of silvery purple sparks.

"I'm actually going to go to bed," Hermione decided. "I want to get up early to finish packing and help Cordie make breakfast."

"If she comes home," Justin remarked, although he could see that his comment had made Hermione feel uncomfortable. "Hermione, don't you like Mum going out with your dad?"

"It isn't that," Hermione said, not wanting Justin to get the wrong idea. "It just seems strange to think of Daddy being with someone else, even someone I really like."

Justin decided to let Hermione in on the talk he had with his mother. "Hermione, just so you know, Mum really likes your dad. In fact I think she's in love with him, although she didn't come out and say that directly."

Harry was not entirely surprised by Justin's confession; he had seen the looks the couple had shared on a more than one occasion over the Christmas holiday. "Do you think it's going to get serious?"

Justin nodded and said honestly. "I do."

"But what will happen to us if Cordie moves to live with Daddy?" Hermione asked, one of her major concerns being made obvious. "I

know I'm old enough to make my own way in the world, but it would seem strange without her."

"You'll continue to be able to stay here," Harry said immediately. "My home will always be your home and that goes for all of you."

Justin smiled gratefully at his friend, although this had not been an issue for him. "Thanks, Harry. I appreciate it, but like Hermione, I'm seventeen and it won't matter where Mum lives, except of course, for the fact that I'd miss her if she were to move to Sydney."

"You don't think they'd move here if they got married?" Luna asked, as she was rather taken with Cordelia, having grown very close to her.

Hermione concurred. "I doubt it. Daddy doesn't like living here."

"But Sirius Black is dead now," Padma pointed out, having no idea that the truth was very different.

"I don't think that matters anyway. Daddy prefers living in Sydney," Hermione said, glossing over the mention of Sirius, who was currently working at St. Bart's, a wizarding hospital in Manchester. "And I can imagine that Cordie probably would as well."

Justin agreed. "I think so." Another bang made him jump and he changed the subject. "Those fireworks are loud."

"I think I'm going to watch them," Luna decided and she wandered over to the window.

Hermione shivered. "And I think I'll still head up to bed."

"Goodnight and a Happy New Year," Ron called out, not looking around, his attention firmly fixed on the firework display he had joined Luna in watching.

Luna, Neville and Parvati also called out the same sentiment, before they too were drawn to the display outside.

Justin and Padma however followed Harry and Hermione up to bed, Padma slipping into Justin's room with him.

Harry followed Hermione to her room, before turning her to face him, concern marring his features. "You'll be okay? I know that talking about your dad remarrying is upsetting for you."

Hermione gave Harry a hug. "Of course I'll be okay." She then kissed him lightly on the mouth. "Goodnight, Harry."

"Night." After returning the kiss, Harry headed off to his bedroom and, after showering, he climbed into bed. However, he was disturbed ten minutes later by a knock on his door. Putting down the book he was reading, Harry got up and opened the door to find Hermione standing there, and he stood back to let her in. "Are the fireworks bothering you?"

Hermione headed into Harry's room and shook her head. "Not really. I was thinking about Daddy. Can I sit with you for a while?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Hermione, I'm hardly going to complain if you want to sit in bed with me."

Hermione slid into bed next to Harry, snuggling up to his side, before bringing up what was bothering her. "Do you think I'm a terrible person because I'm finding it hard to deal with Daddy dating again?"

"No," Harry said immediately. "I find it weird when Remus goes out on a date like he has tonight and he's not even my real dad."

"You really love him, don't you?"

Harry nodded. "I've grown closer to him than I ever imagined possible. When I first left the Dursleys I imagined that Charlie would be the one I'd grow close to, or Mrs. Weasley, and even though I do love them, I feel as though Remus is my real parent. Sometimes I wish he was."

Hermione snuggled even closer to Harry. "I think he does too."

Harry knew this only too well, he and Remus having talked in depth after rescuing Sirius. "He's told me he considers me his son and that's one of the reasons why he tried to ditch me when we rescued Sirius."

"You've never said that before."

"It's never really come up," Harry said, before changing the subject back to Hermione's father. "I think Cordie would make Lester happy, although I don't know happy Dudley would make her."

"Oddly enough Daddy likes him and so I'm sure Cordie will."

Everyone had been stunned when Lester had offered to take a traumatized Dudley under his wing, and so Dudley had been transferred to Australia and now believed himself to be a distant cousin of Hermione's. Although Lester had left Dudley behind in Australia this time, he had said he might consider bringing him over the next time he visited, something Harry was not exactly looking forward to, even though Lester had assured him that Dudley was changing.

Harry wasn't certain about Hermione's comment about Cordelia. "I'm not so sure about but I wouldn't worry about it until it happens."

Hermione decided that Harry was right. "Okay." She then decided to put all of her problems on the backburner and she smiled playfully at Harry. "Do you want to cuddle?"

Harry accepted and he slid down the bed a little, wrapping his arm around Hermione's waist. Both of them knew where the cuddling was going to lead, and sure enough within a few minutes the two of them were kissing, and by the time they separated, they were both breathing heavily.

Harry leant on his elbow, looking down at Hermione, a mischievous grin on his face. "It's a good job Cordie isn't here."

"Why's that?" Hermione asked as she smiled back up at Harry.

"Because I don't think I want her to catch me kissing you like this." Harry kissed Hermione on the mouth again before sliding the strap of her nightie down and kissing her shoulder, before skimming light kisses over the soft swell of her breast.

"I think after that you should take off your top," Hermione teased in a voice she only used when she was alone with Harry.

Harry reciprocated in the same teasing manner. "I'll think about it." Then he shook his head. "Nah, I'd better not. It might be too much for you."

Hermione giggled and she reached across to Harry's pajama top. "How about if I just unbutton this a little first and you can let me peek?"

"If you kiss me first, then I'll think about it," Harry said, even though Hermione was already unfastening his buttons and he was making no effort to stop her.

After she had finished her chore, Hermione wrapped her arms around Harry's neck and pulled his head down to kiss him. As with any normal teenagers, hormones soon got the better of them and the kisses became more fervent, with teeth and lips clashing, the pair getting far too hot and bothered than was good for them. One thing led to another and eventually the situation reached a point where the two of them found themselves almost unclothed, and the inevitable was brought up, surprisingly by Hermione.

"Harry, do you want to go further?"

Although they had indulged in some extremely heavy petting by that point, Harry was rather stunned by the question and he therefore decided to make sure he had understood Hermione correctly. "You mean go all the way?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes."

In response, Harry turned around behind him to pick up his wand and cast a spell. "The Weasleys, Remus, Cordie and your father would all be fighting over who gets to kill me if I got you pregnant," Harry observed, before checking again that Hermione really did want to take the final step. "Hermione, are you sure you really want to do this?"

Hermione answered Harry in a firm voice that belied her inner tension. "Yes."

With the moment he had been dreaming of for quite some time finally upon him, Harry decided to ask for Hermione's opinion. "Um, how do you want to do it?"

Despite the rather explicit dreams she sometimes unaccountably had, having to deal with the intricacies of being intimate in real life was very different from dream sex, and Hermione gave Harry a nervous smile, before saying, "The usual way with you on top."

And so the two of them began to kiss, slowly at first and then almost haphazardly, their hands traveling up and down each other's bodies until their feelings began to overwhelm them. Then, realizing that he would soon get to the point of no return, Harry stopped kissing Hermione and changed his position so that he was half covering her body. "Are you ready?"

Hermione placed her now trembling hands on Harry's shoulders and nodded. As Harry moved completely over her and gently pushed her legs apart with his knees, Hermione could feel him shaking a lot more than she was, and she had a sneaking suspicion that he was probably more scared about this first time than she was.

Harry was, but it was not for the reasons Hermione believed. He could still remember how much it had hurt Hannah when they had done this, and his hesitancy meant that it took him a little while to finally get it right before he suddenly found himself sliding into Hermione. As he bent his head to kiss her, Harry was not surprised to see a few tears slipping down her cheeks. "Hermione, I'm so sorry."

"It's all right, Harry. It's not that bad," Hermione lied, as she struggled to compose herself as she made every attempt to get used to the strange sensation of Harry being inside of her. "Just give me a few moments to get used to it."

Harry placed little kisses over Hermione's face, not wanting to withdraw, but also not wanting to do anything that might hurt Hermione.

Although Hermione still felt far from comfortable, the burning sensation, which had accompanied the pain of Harry taking her virginity, began to fade away and she eventually nodded at Harry. "I'm ready."

Giving Hermione a quick kiss before turning his attention to the matter at hand, Harry began to move clumsily above her. With

Hermione lying looking up at him and given that he really didn't know what he was doing, having only done it once before and badly at that, Harry felt more than a self-conscious. What made it worse was that he was also struggling against the wonderfully welcome sensations that threatened to precipitately overcome him.

Within a very short period of time, far too quickly for Hermione to get used to the feeling of being made love to, she realized that it was almost over as Harry's already unsynchronized movements became even more jerky and chaotic.

Moments later, Harry gave up trying to hold back and Hermione held him to her as he shuddered. Lost in the sensation, Harry buried his face in Hermione's neck, barely noticing as she whispered comforting words of encouragement to him.

When he was finally in control of himself again, Harry kissed Hermione almost reverently several times, before turning them so that she was lying mostly on top of him.

Hermione let her head fall onto Harry's shoulder and she made a half-protest. "You're going to get squashed."

"I don't care." Harry stroked Hermione's hair as she lay on him, before apologizing for what he knew had hardly been a stellar performance on his part. "I'm sorry."

Aware of what Harry was apologizing for, Hermione lifted her head to look at him. "Harry, I never expected this time to be perfect, and besides, all the books I've read have said that it will get better with time."

Harry couldn't help but smile. He might have known that Hermione would mention books right after they had just finished making love for the first time. "No matter what the books say, I still wish it had been better for you this time."

Hermione laid her head back down on Harry's chest. "I'm just glad that my first time was with you."

"I love you," Harry said, yawning as an overwhelming feeling of lethargy threatened to overcome him.

"I love you too," Hermione responded, not noticing that Harry had not said the same to her about his first time.

Harry said nothing in return, and Hermione was hardly surprised when a few minutes later little snores suddenly began to echo in her ear, and she carefully got up so as not to wake Harry and headed into the bathroom.

When she got back, Harry had curled up into a ball, his snoring a thing of the past now that he was off his back. Climbing in behind him, Hermione wrapped her arm around Harry's waist, and curling up to his back, she closed her eyes, and just like him, she was soon asleep.

Next Chapter: Tom's plans come to fruition.

Note: Update should be up on Monday/Tuesday.

Chapter 52: Blood

January 3rd 1997

Severus watched the fifth year potions class file in. "Don't just flap about. Get your parchment and quills out."

Luna preferred the class lectures to the actual potion making and she hurried to do as ordered. Next to her, Susan, who had adjusted well to being kept back a year, did the same.

Severus was about to make a comment when Susan gave a tiny gasp of pain. "What is it, Bones?"

"Nothing, Sir." Susan then stuck her finger in mouth.

Severus scowled. "You should know better than to put your fingers in your mouth in this classroom."

"I have a paper cut, Sir," Susan explained, after whipping her finger out of her mouth. "And I didn't touch anything except for my piece of parchment."

"On your head be it," Severus snapped, and then he looked askance at Susan as she rose up out of her seat. "Where do you think you are going?"

"To throw this parchment in the bin," Susan said, as she approached the front of the room. "It has blood all over it."

"Make it quick, girl, and then sit down," Severus barked out, before swinging around to face the blackboard. As he did so, a thought suddenly occurred to him, and he filed it away and began lecturing. "The..."

February 14th 1997

Harry grumbled as he walked along. "I hate tests."

"Harry, you know you'll do fine," Hermione assured him, slipping her hand into his.

"But its potions," Harry protested.

"And you'll do fine," Hermione repeated.

Harry continued to grumble right up until they reached the entrance to the potions classroom, where he reluctantly let go of Hermione's hand and went inside to sit down. About to take his things out, he was stopped when Severus barked at him, "I will be providing parchment and quills, Potter."

Harry hid his scowl as he took this to mean that Severus was intimating that Harry would be cheating. As the rest of the class members trickled into the potions classroom in dribs and drabs, Severus repeated his comment about the parchment several times, making Harry reluctantly admit to himself that maybe he was wrong about Severus singling him out.

Bang on the top of the hour, Severus flicked his wand at the classroom door to seal it, before picking up a sheaf of parchment and stepping forward. "If during the test you require a second sheet, put up your hand." He then began to hand out the parchment to each student, together with a quill.

When he reached Harry, nobody noticed Severus taking a piece of parchment from the bottom of the pile and handing it over. As Harry reached out to take it, he grimaced as the paper sliced into his hand. "Ouch!"

Severus feigned irritation as blood from the somewhat deep paper cut blossomed onto the parchment. "I have enough problems reading your appalling scrawl, Potter, without having to fight to see what you've written through your blood."

Severus intended to snatch the parchment away, but Harry pulled out his wand and used a spell to clean his blood off the parchment before Severus could take it. Furious that he had been thwarted, Severus barked yet again at Harry, "And this time try and keep it clean, Potter."

"Yes, Sir," Harry said, and he then used his wand to quickly heal the small cut on his finger before settling down to begin the test.

1st March 1997

St Bart's Hospital

Sirius had now been working at St. Bart's almost ever since he had been sprung from the Ministry. As he had promised, Remus had bent over backwards to provide Sirius with a background, the requisite papers, and an opening in the surgical department at St. Bart's, Sirius assuring Remus he was capable of dealing with the junior position. He had, however, progressed within a very short time to a more senior position, his dedication to his work and natural abilities giving him an edge over some of the older and more experienced healers who had applied for the position.

It was just after six a.m. as Sirius yawned widely on leaving the operating theater before dragging himself into the nurses' station to find just one nurse, a slightly plump, redheaded nurse named Lilith Gosford, sitting down and having a coffee. She glanced at Sirius, thinking he looked awful. "You look exhausted, Healer Blackwell."

Sirius was. "I am and I was hoping that I'd get off sooner." He groaned as he noticed the empty coffee pot. "Just great. Where's a house-elf when you want one?"

Lilith got up. "I imagine they're tied up with other duties. Let me make you a cup."

Sirius headed to the room that he and some of the other healers sometimes used when they wanted to catch some sleep but remain within the hospital. "Is this free?"

"Yep," Lilith said, measuring out coffee, before filling the coffee pot with water. "One of those house-elves you were complaining about changed the sheets about ten minutes ago."

Sirius shrugged – he was far from bothered about clean sheets. "Right now I'm so tired I wouldn't care if a cadaver was in there with me." He had already taken two pepper-up potions and was at his limit.

Lilith laughed. "I know how that feels." She then walked over with Sirius' coffee. "This is instant but I've some fresh on if you want something slightly more palatable."

"This will do fine," Sirius said, lounging against the bed. "You weren't on duty last night, were you?"

"I've had a few days off," Lilith revealed, before grabbing the sign that everyone used if they needed a little time alone. "I'll set up the 'Do Not Disturb' sign for you."

"Can you ask someone to wake me in a couple of hours?" Sirius asked, before grimacing at the taste of the coffee. "This is bloody awful."

"I know," Lilith said, grinning. "And now I'm going to have a decent cup of coffee."

Sirius followed her out, reaching around her to try and grab the coffee pot before she could. "Not before I do, you're not."

"No wonder chivalry is dead," Lilith said jokingly.

"Then it's a good job that I'm no gentleman," Sirius responded, intending to move Lilith to one side. Instead he pulled her towards him. Ever since they had started working together, Sirius had fancied her, and he suspected she felt the same. And after the horrendous night he had had, he decided he wanted more than just a cup of coffee. "And I'm willing to forgo the coffee for a kiss."

In response, Lilith wrapped herself around Sirius, opening her mouth to him as he lowered his head to capture her mouth under his. As the kiss grew more passionate, Sirius' hands slipped under Lilith's surgical top until they contacted with the soft skin of her back. Moving his mouth to nuzzle her neck, he shifted his hands so that they left the gentle warmth of Lilith's back and moved to cup her bottom.

Lilith had wanted Sirius for quite some time, and so with trembling hands, she began to reciprocate and slid her hands under his own surgical top, her fingers brushing through the soft hairs they came into contact with, making Sirius groan.

Sirius found Lilith's mouth again, and he slowly backed her towards the door of the overnight room. Breaking off the kiss, he grabbed the DND sign and hung it up, before pushing Lilith into the room and pulling off his surgical top, Lilith doing the same with her top,

revealing a frilly yellow bra, which she unclipped to release her rather ample breasts, before stepping back to kiss Sirius again.

Their kisses began to grow more frantic, and what was left of their clothing ended up being strewn across the tiny room, leaving them both completely naked as Sirius pulled Lilith hard against him.

Lilith could feel Sirius' arousal nudging her stomach as he continued to maneuver her backwards, and she gave a tiny squeak as her knees hit the bed and she toppled over, Sirius falling with her.

After sliding fully onto the narrow bed, Sirius tugged Lilith so that she was lying next to him, before continuing the passionate kisses they had been sharing just moments earlier. Hands had only just begun a fevered exploration of each other's bodies, when Lilith abruptly pushed Sirius onto his back, before stepping away and realizing they had a problem. "Shit! My wand is in the locker outside."

"Then it's a good job I have mine," Sirius said, grabbing it off the side before casting the requisite spell.

Once he had finished invoking the protection, Lilith moved so that she was sitting astride Sirius. Then, as she watched Sirius' face, Lilith reached down and guided him into her, her breath catching as they became one.

Sirius was surprised that Lilith had foregone the foreplay and was now setting the pace as they had sex. As she tightened around him, Sirius knew that he wouldn't last as long as he wanted, and as Lilith drove him on, Sirius grabbed Lilith's hips and bucked upwards, unable to bite back his cry of pleasure. Lilith smiled softly down at Sirius as he held her tightly while his shudders peaked, lessened, and then died away. Then she leant down and kissed him.

Sirius cupped her face as she went to move away. "That was rather selfish of me."

Under normal circumstances Lilith might have agreed but not this time. "I knew from your face that you needed this."

Sirius smiled up at her, this being the first time he had had sex since his imprisonment in Azkaban. "You have no idea."

Lilith gave him a soft smile in return. "I think I do."

Sirius knew she didn't and that she'd be horrified if she knew the truth. "Either way, thanks."

"You're welcome," Lilith said, and she slipped off Sirius to head into the teeny bathroom that lay off the overnight room. "I'll be back in a moment."

When she returned, Sirius had a sheet pulled over him, but he shed it in order to allow Lilith to climb into the bed with him. Lilith stroked his chest as she asked what the emergency had been. "So what happened yesterday?"

"Four separate incidents, the most serious of which was a Muggle train derailment," Sirius said, his voice grave. "The word is that they were all acts of terrorism."

Lilith felt a shiver go down her spine. "How many dead?"

"In total, over a hundred," Sirius said. "And they were all accidents that should never have happened."

Aware that Sirius wanted to talk, Lilith encouraged him to do so. "Tell me."

"A Muggle train jumped the tracks at a level crossing where the tracks had been checked just that morning..." Sirius began, having overheard an official talking when he had been treating the injured at the scene, a Muggle-born witch having come into the hospital with her friend and explaining that she and some of her other friends had been onboard, and that her friends were still trapped inside. Sirius and his team had immediately apparated out.

"The Muggle train could have been defective," Lilith pointed out.

"It could have been," Sirius had to admit, but he just knew there was more to it than that. "But the fact that at almost the same time a Muggle bus suddenly left the road and careened into a group of bystanders, there was an explosion at a Muggle power plant, together with a similar occurrence at a Muggle shopping center, makes it seem unlikely. But it was the train, and more so the power plant, that mostly caused problems for us. The plant was rather

close to a local wizarding community and destroyed more than half of the homes in it and led to some serious injuries."

"Do the Muggle police or our Aurors have any leads?" Lilith asked.

Sirius shrugged. "I really don't know." He yawned.

Lilith sat up. "Do you want to get some sleep?"

Sirius shook his head. "No, I'd like to have sex again."

"Did I ever tell you what a charmer you are?" Lilith asked in a dry voice.

"Nope, but we both know that sex is all this is about," Sirius said being as blunt as he had been earlier.

"True, so let's get down to it," Lilith said. "Your turn to do the work."

Tugging the sheet over his head, Sirius began to do as he had been told.

9th March 1997

Remus got to his feet as Sirius was led in. After closing the door and warding the room and lowering his hood, he turned to Sirius. "Sirius, I didn't expect you to be stupid enough to come in here."

Sirius sat down. "But you must have anticipated that I might as I'm on your list of approved visitors, but even so I had hell of a game getting in. What are you doing here on a Sunday? I thought you would have been watching Harry play."

"I'm a little behind on a case I was doing on the side, and I have to appear in court tomorrow," Remus explained as he sat back down.

Sirius knew only too well what case it had to be. "You're defending Arabella Zabini?"

Remus shook his head. "Not exactly. But I am the defense's star witness. Amelia Bones is the prosecutor."

Sirius was well aware by now that Remus and Amelia were far from fond of each other. "You've got a tough one there. This is husband number six now, isn't it?"

"Seven," Remus corrected. "But she does have an airtight alibi."

Sirius shook his head in disappointment. "Please tell me you didn't."

Remus nodded. "I'm afraid I did. Ignotus asked me to investigate something for him over the New Year and I was unfortunate enough to have to go as far as I did."

"So it wasn't done for pleasure?" Sirius asked.

"I can't say I didn't enjoy it," Remus responded honestly. "But no, it was purely business and purely coincidental that her husband died that night." He then enquired as to Sirius' unscheduled appearance. "So what can I do for you?"

"I need to talk to you about some supposedly Muggle accidents," Sirius said, before outlining the four accidents that had taken place a week earlier.

Remus shrugged. "So what's the big deal?"

"The Muggle police said that all four accidents were rather unusual in nature: the train did jump the tracks but no-one could discover why; the bus driver said it was as if he had to steer the bus into the crowd; there were no explosives found at the power station – the thing just simply blew up; and the explosion at the shopping center was caused when gas pipes that had recently been refitted ruptured." Sirius finished speaking and waited for Remus to draw his own conclusions as he asked, "Did you investigate?"

"No, but I know that Bones and her teams did," Remus said, the wizarding village's destruction having caused quite a commotion. He then went on. "Although I thought at the time the explosion was an accident, it's obvious you don't. You think it's Voldemort, don't you?"

Sirius shook his head. "All four accidents happened almost simultaneously, and I know they could simply have been a terrible coincidence but instinct is telling me differently, especially given that the bus incident definitely sounds like someone used the Imperius

curse on the driver. And even though it looks like his handiwork, I don't think it is Voldemort but I do think it's someone from the wizarding world."

"It certainly matches Voldemort's MO, but only up to a point. Perhaps someone wants us to believe he's back, maybe your captor."

Sirius suspected that it was the man who had taken him but couldn't say this to Remus. "Who knows? But it's the fact that Voldemort started on wizards last time and not Muggles that makes me believe it's someone else, although I think the wizarding village was an accident and not planned."

"I agree about that," Remus said, rubbing a hand over his chin. "But even so, it could be him and it could just mean that this time he's starting simpler. Muggles are far easier than wizards to kill; they don't fight back because they're not aware there's anything to fight back against."

A knock interrupted them and Remus dropped the wards and got up, opening up his office door. "Yes, Mercury?"

"An urgent owl, Sir." Mercury, the messenger who dealt with all deliveries for the Unspeakables handed over the delivery the owl had made. She was also one of only two people who knew the identities of every Unspeakable, except for Ignotus, although she had, of course, sworn an oath to keep this information private. "It's a medical owl from St. Mungo's and so I thought I'd better interrupt."

"Thanks," Remus said, and he shut the door, before sitting down and turning back to Sirius. "I need to read this."

Having overheard the conversation, Sirius held out a hand. "Go ahead."

Remus ripped open the envelope and pulled out a sheet of paper, paling slightly as he read it. "Sirius, it's from Hermione. Harry's been seriously hurt in the match against Gryffindor." The match, which had supposed to be have been a week earlier had been delayed because of the attacks on the wizarding village, with one of Hufflepuff's chasers having a seriously injured parent.

Sirius almost ripped the sheet in half as he grabbed it from Remus and read the note. "A rogue Bludger? How on earth could Harry have been hit with a rogue Bludger; they're supposed to self-destruct if something goes wrong."

"If you're right about those attacks last week, then it looks as though whoever is behind them has decided to up the ante," Remus said, getting to his feet, his intention of doing some work now gone. "Go home, and I'll head to St. Mungo's."

Sirius shook his head. "I'm in disguise and no-one's going to know it's me, so I'm coming with you."

St. Mungo's

When the two men reached the hospital, they found Hermione in the corridor outside of the emergency treatment area. Hermione promptly burst into the tears that she had been struggling to hold back. "They won't let me in, and Mrs. Weasley said he might die."

Spotting a bench, Remus steered her towards it and sat her down. "Tell me what happened, Hermione."

Through her tears, Hermione managed to explain what had happened in the latest match. "Harry had just grabbed the Snitch when a Bludger just double-backed on itself. Harry tried to avoid it, but it went after him. It wouldn't stop and it was almost as if it was meant for him. In the end it got him and it..." Hermione gave a sob as she recalled the crunching sound of the Bludger impacting Harry's head, before she took a deep breath and managed to go on. "...and it hit him the back of head, and he fell off his broom."

Sirius' stomach was going over. "How far up?"

"About thirty feet," Hermione managed to blub. "I thought he was dead."

"I'll try and find out what's going on," Sirius said and he walked off. When he returned a short time later, he passed on what he had found out. "I managed to find a nurse to tell me what was going on when I showed her my credentials. She said that they're doing everything they can but she can't tell me any more than that."

It was a long two hour wait before Molly Weasley came out of the emergency treatment area, her face grey. She was relieved to see Remus, although she didn't recognize the blonde man with him. "It's touch and go. The Bludger fractured his skull in three places, he's got a broken arm, two broken legs and a punctured lung."

Hermione's weeping began afresh, and Remus held her tightly against his side, his own voice shaking as he said, "Fuck!"

"I have to get back in there," Molly said. "I know he won't know that I'm there but I can't leave Harry on his own."

"Can we see him?" Hermione asked in between sobs.

Molly shook her head. "Not yet. I had to threaten them to let me stay."

"We'll stay with Hermione," Remus promised, aware that it would be unlikely that the health team would let anyone else in. "Is there anything you need doing at home?"

"No," Molly said. "Arthur should have everything in hand." She then turned and hurried back into the room.

Molly returned fifty minutes later with better news. "He appears to be stabilizing. You'll be able to see him shortly." She looked around. "Where's Remus?"

"He said he had to go," Hermione said, Remus having had to leave when he had received an urgent owl from Ignotus, although it had taken Sirius a long time to persuade him to go, promising that he'd let Remus know if anything changed.

Molly guessed that it was something along these lines and she glanced over at Sirius. "I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself before. I'm Molly Weasley, Harry's guardian."

"Simon Blackwell, an old friend of Remus'," Sirius said. "I was with Remus when he received Miss Granger's note."

Hermione could see Molly was curious. "He's a Healer. He wanted to see how Harry was doing."

Molly brightened. "It's very kind of you to come, especially as you can't really know Harry that well."

"I don't, but I have met him a few times," Sirius said truthfully. "And he seems a very nice young man. I hope he recovers."

A healer came out. "Mrs. Weasley, you can bring Miss Granger in now."

Hermione held out her hand. "Healer Blackwell, thanks for coming."

"You're welcome, Miss Granger," Sirius said as he shook hands with Hermione before tipping his head politely in Molly's direction. "Mrs. Weasley." Then he walked off, intending to contact Macclesby to get a message to Remus as he had promised he would.

Molly put her arm around Hermione. "He seemed very nice."

"He is," Hermione said, wondering what Molly would think if she knew the truth. Then all thoughts of Sirius vanished as she was led into the room where Harry was lying.

The Next Day

Severus bowed low to Tom. "Potter is still holding his own."

"A pity," Tom said. "Have you spoken to Zabini?"

Severus nodded. "Apparently Potter said something a little less than kind about Arabella's marital status and Zabini took offense to it and cursed the bludger."

"I'd have done the same," Tom acknowledged. "But Zabini knew that Potter wasn't his to touch and I'm afraid that I can't let that slide."

"What do you want me to do?" Severus asked.

"Teach him a lesson," Tom decided. "I'd have had him killed but given that he's almost managed to achieve what you so far have not, I'm going to let him live."

Severus swallowed hard, and he defended himself against Tom's remark. "The potion is almost ready. I just need to get some of Potter's blood."

"You had better do it quickly, Severus," Tom warned. "My patience is growing thin."

"I understand," Severus said. "I'm afraid I need to get back to Hogwarts."

"Then go," Tom said, before calling out just as Severus reached the door. "Severus?"

"Yes?" Severus said, as he turned back.

"Crucio," Tom called out, watching impassively as Severus folded under the spell. He let it go before it did too much damage. "Now you may go."

As Severus shakily made his way out of Tom's rooms, he pulled out a vial of anti-Cruciatius potion that he had started to carry with him, Tom now having begun to adopt the use of the pain curse on a more regular basis.

Tom had used it on him when Severus' plan to gain Harry's blood on the doctored parchment had failed, and just over a week ago when Severus had been unable to get away from Hogwarts to be part of the teams that had carried out the attacks on the Muggles. Lucius had been the one to garner the glory from that, even though half of a wizarding village had been destroyed, and, with Zabini's almost successful attack on Harry, Severus had been made to look incompetent again.

Deciding to take his anger out on Zabini, Severus headed back to Hogwarts.

March 15th 1997

Cordelia was surprised to see Severus standing so close to her. "Professor Snape, you made me jump."

Severus placed a tray of vials down on the bedside table. "I brought Poppy some more painkilling and nutritional potions up for her stockroom and for Potter. How is he?"

Having been made aware of the discord between Harry and Severus, Cordelia was now even more surprised, but she still gave an update on Harry's health. "He's still unconscious but Madam Pomfrey said that now the swelling in his brain is almost gone, they should be able to wake him tomorrow." She then yawned and stretched.

Severus was well aware of how tired Cordelia had to be. While everyone else had done a fair bit of sitting with Harry, between them, Molly, Remus and Cordelia had shouldered the majority of the responsibility, all of them refusing to let Hermione and Justin and their friends tire themselves out by sitting up with Harry during the night. Severus therefore made a seemingly innocent offer. "If you want to take a five minute break, I can sit with him."

The stress of Harry's accident had taken its toll, and Cordelia was therefore close to dead on her feet and so she didn't think to question Severus' motives. "Thank you. I'm just going to freshen up and then I'll be straight back. Madam Pomfrey said to wake her if there's a problem."

"I suspect I'm more than capable of doing that," Severus drawled in a sarcastic voice, before picking up the vial of potions.

A thought occurred to Cordelia as she headed towards the door. "Why aren't you in bed?"

"I occasionally suffer from insomnia," Severus said truthfully. "So I decided to do a few chores rather than just lying futilely in bed." He glanced disdainfully at Harry. "Obviously babysitting Potter wasn't top of my list but while I'm here you might as well make the most of it."

Cordelia decided that she should make it quick. "I won't be very long."

"You have fifteen minutes," Severus informed her. "After that I need to get back to my potion."

In the space of fifteen minutes, Cordelia was aware that she would probably just have enough time to take a quick shower, grab a sandwich and down a pepper-up potion. "Thank you."

"Fourteen minutes," Severus responded and Cordelia hurriedly left.

After a few moments had gone by, Severus opened the doors to the ward to check that the corridor was clear, before returning to where Harry was lying in bed. "Let's see you outsmart me now, Potter."

Lying unconscious in bed, Harry had no idea of what Severus had said or even that he was being observed. After shaking Harry and getting no response, Severus produced a sharp needle and pierced Harry's finger. Harry made no sign of being aware of what Severus was doing, nor that his blood was being collected in a small vial that Severus had brought with him for the purpose.

After healing Harry's finger, Severus headed to the stockroom and began to refill Poppy's supplies. As he placed the last vial of painkiller in its place, he thought about Harry lying helplessly in the bed. He was well aware that Tom wanted Harry to die a very public death, but Severus was conscious of the fact that a better opportunity would never arise than at that moment and it would be worth suffering a little torture if he could fulfill one of his life's dreams.

Heading out of the stockroom, he started back towards Harry's bed. His hand was just going to his sleeve when Molly entered the ward, and Severus reluctantly acknowledged her, his hand falling to his side. "Mrs. Weasley."

With Harry so vulnerable, Molly had been more than a little suspicious and concerned when Cordelia had turned up in their rooms to shower and she had relayed Severus' offer to Molly. Molly had immediately hurried to Harry's bedside.

Glancing down, she could see that Harry's chest was still steadily rising and falling, and she was relieved to see that everything seemed to be normal. She turned to face Severus. "Thank you for standing in for Cordie, Severus."

"She looked exhausted and someone needed to," Severus said snarkily.

Molly sat down by Harry. "I'll be sitting with Harry now."

"Then I'll be off. I have better things to do than to babysit the boy," Severus snapped and he swept out of the hospital ward.

Molly glanced at Harry yet again, and although he seemed fine, she couldn't hide the niggling voice that said 'what if he's done something to him I can't detect'. Getting to her feet, she reluctantly woke Poppy.

Potions Room

Severus had no idea that his motives had been questioned by Molly, but he wouldn't have cared if he had known. He loathed her just as much as he loathed most of her family, and his concern had been contrived in order to obtain Harry's blood, which now resided in the vial that Severus had secreted under his cloak.

After leaving the ward, Severus headed for his potions classroom. Once inside, he closed and warded the door to the classroom.

Taking out the vial of blood, Severus smiled. "Perhaps this is a better way to kill you, Potter. It's certainly going to be more painful than a quick Killing Curse or a Bludger." The smile still lingering, Severus headed to the left of his desk and into the potions stockroom. Making his way to the rear of the room, he reached out and twisted a medallion of a snake inset into the wall, a hidden door sliding open moments later. The room beyond was where he stored the more dangerous potions ingredients and where he carried out his most private experiments.

At that moment a brass cauldron was gently simmering on the far bench in the room. Walking over to it, Severus tipped in the vial of blood that he had taken from Harry. And just like the previous samples of blood he had acquired, it sank into potion, disappearing quickly from sight.

Severus gave a self-satisfied smile as the red of Harry's blood was absorbed the deep violet potion. "Soon, Potter, soon."

7th April 1997

A now fully recovered Harry joined Justin, Hannah and Susan at the Hufflepuff table, happily grabbing a handful of mini bunny shaped chocolates from one of the bowls that littered the table. "This is one thing I love about coming back after Easter, the goodies."

Justin grinned. "Hermione will kill you for eating those, Harry. You know they're bad for you."

"I don't see it stopping you," Harry retorted as he looked around. "Have you seen George? Luna said he was dropping by to see her to collect the books she found over the Easter holidays and had forgotten to give to him."

"I'm surprised the Headmaster allowed it," Susan chimed in, also helping herself to the chocolates.

"It's hard to say no to George," Harry said, not able to tell her that George was also currently acting as a runner between Ignotus and Remus to pass on any messages that Ignotus preferred delivered verbally and not via owl. He then grabbed another handful of chocolate and all conversation ended.

Over at the Gryffindor table Hermione scowled at the Hufflepuffs and pulled out a bag of sugar free sweets, offering one to Ron who refused. "I really wish Harry wouldn't eat that stuff. It's not good for him."

"But it tastes so nice," Ron said, grinning at his friend as he too helped himself to a handful of the sugar laden chocolate from off the table. "Try some."

Hermione refused. "No, thank you. I have some sugar free sweets Harry bought me."

Ron gave up on years of programming by Hermione's parents, particularly as Parvati handed her boyfriend a large chocolate heart, and after eating half of it, his appetite far from dulled, Ron began on his dinner.

It was not until a few minutes after dinner had finished, and Filius had spoken to the pupils, that one of Luna's table mates began to notice some of the pupils looking rather pale. "Luna, do you feel okay?"

"Fine," Luna said, and she continued picking at the sweets that still littered the tables. She stopped, however, when two girls on her table suddenly began to moan and hold their stomachs.

It soon became apparent that this was no isolated incident as more and more students began to follow in the girls' footsteps.

From the Gryffindor table, Hermione looked over to Harry's table in alarm and screamed out, "Harry!"

Next Chapter: We discover what's happened.

Note: Update should be online sometime next week, although I'm still working on it and so progress will be slower than it has been this week.

Chapter 53: Death by Chocolate

Hearing Hermione's cry, Ron followed Hermione's line of sight and quickly spotted that Harry was doubled up over the Hufflepuff table, as were Susan and quite a few of the other students. He also noticed that Filius Flitwick and the other teachers were swiftly rising to head to the individual house tables where some of the older students were beginning to help their fallen housemates.

"My God!" Hermione muttered softly as both she and Ron also started to get to their feet. "I think it's just the Muggle-borns, Ron. None of Slytherin is affected."

Ron scanned the room and he was horrified to realize that Hermione was correct, almost. "But Harry and Susan aren't Muggle-borns."

"But everyone else who is affected is," Hermione said.

Neville, who had been listening to their conversation, spotted something strange. "Except for Justin and you, Hermione."

"So why aren't they affected?" Ron asked as he swept around the table, following Hermione as she headed for Harry with Neville in her wake.

"I don't know about Justin but I haven't eaten the chocolates!" Hermione suddenly exclaimed as they reached Harry, Neville peeling off to check on his fiancée.

On the Ravenclaw table, Luna had also worked out about the chocolates and, startling Padma who was sitting next to her, she immediately jumped up onto the table and yelled at the top of her voice, "Nobody eat any more of the chocolates!"

Those with chocolates in their hands immediately dropped them as Luna turned her wand on the bowls of sweets on her table. "Reducto, Reducto, Reducto."

However, the next sound that came from Luna's mouth was a scream as a spell hit her, throwing her sideward off the Ravenclaw table.

Ron, who was helping Justin to prop a moaning Harry up, yelled out Luna's name as he saw her go down and Remus, who had just reached the Gryffindor table, turned to discover Luna was being dragged to her feet at wandpoint by Severus Snape, the instigator of the spell.

Having immediately copied Luna's actions by destroying the sweets on the Hufflepuff table, it meant that Hermione still had her wand drawn and she turned it on Severus, Justin and Ron moving to flank her.

It was Ron, however, who bravely stepped forward and made a demand. "I suggest you let her go, Snape."

"Not so fast, blood traitor, not so fast," Severus snapped, wincing as Luna kicked out at him. "Diffindo." As Luna screamed again and sagged in Severus' arms, he made another suggestion. "If you don't want to end up like Lovegood here, I recommend that everyone stop where they are and take a good look around."

It was clear why Severus had made the request when, upon glancing about the room, it became apparent that the older students everyone had believed to be helping their fellow students were in actuality holding them at wandpoint.

Suddenly all attention was refocused on the doors to the Great Hall as they swung open and a large contingent of white-masked men entered. Screams went up as the men were recognized as Death Eaters, but it was those who followed who caused the most panic, two men in silver masks and the last one in a mask of gold. And it was this final man who addressed the students and teachers.

"Good evening, Hogwarts. Do not be alarmed."

However, the man's words did nothing to help the situation as students cowered or cried, others shakily held out wands and some, like Ron, stood mutinously, their wands drawn and ready for action.

Remus also had his wand drawn but his attention was not on the newcomers but on Luna as he started to head towards her and Severus.

"Not a step closer," Severus warned, "...otherwise the next spell I use will kill her."

Remus stopped in his tracks, not willing to risk Luna's life as he suspected that Severus would make good on his promise, and, as he did so, the gold masked man once again became the center of attention.

"As you may have gathered, I have arranged for a small demonstration this evening."

Filius Flitwick, who was tending to a fallen Ravenclaw, glared at Tom. "I hardly consider this to be a small demonstration."

"Maybe not on the scale of Hogwarts but in comparison to what I am about to do, it is definitely small fry," Tom said and he pointed at the floor. "Now, as I'm well aware of your dueling skills, Headmaster, I do believe I would prefer for you to lie down on the floor and put your wand next to you."

"And if I refuse?" an angry and quivering Filius asked.

"Then I will kill you," Tom said bluntly.

Having little choice in the matter, Filius did as he was told, and, as he did, Tom noticed Remus standing less than ten feet away from him. "You too, Professor Lupin."

Instead of doing as he had been ordered, Remus asked, "Who are you and what do you want?"

"I thought that who I am would be rather obvious. And I have to say the same about what I want, which is for you to lie down as I've just told you, otherwise I'm going to kill you where you stand," Tom warned. "The same goes for all teachers and students not on my side – lie down and put your wands next to you. If you do not, then I will carry out my threat."

Those who had been cowering were amongst the first to do as they were instructed, the others swiftly following suit when they realized that they were outnumbered. Hermione was afraid but she, like Ron and Justin, glared at the men who relieved them of their wands before she and Ron helped a semi-conscious Harry onto the ground,

while next to them, Justin helped Neville deal with a similarly afflicted Susan.

Hearing a tortured moan, Severus glanced down at Luna and noticed that she was bleeding even more heavily than he had anticipated, in his anger Severus having injected a great deal of power behind his spell. "I think this one is going to bleed out."

Scared for her friend, Hermione immediately began to get to her feet, only for a powerful freezing spell to hit her in the face. After she collapsed back onto the floor, she was none too gently rolled over by a foot in her stomach.

"I warned you all about what would happen if you disobeyed me," Tom said, before turning his back on Hermione. "But for the moment I want you alive, so I need another student of whom to make an example."

Severus offered up Luna. "I think this one will make the perfect example. She tried to warn everyone about the chocolates."

Tom pointed towards the middle of the room. "Move her over there where everyone can see what I am about to do and make sure she doesn't die."

Upon hearing Tom's warning, Remus also started to get to his feet, only to be blasted backwards by Tom. "Stay where you are, Lupin. Disobey me again and another student will join her."

Not wishing to cause another student's death, Remus had little choice but to remain on the ground.

Despite Tom's warning to the downed teacher, Severus still ensured that he kept his distance from Remus as he dragged Luna across the Hall. He was smirking as he did so, expecting Tom to torture Luna, rather than murder her, to teach Hermione a lesson.

Tom was intending to do exactly that, but before he did, he released Hermione from the neck up from the Petrificus Spell and asked, "Do you have anything you wish to say to your friend before I deal with her?"

Afraid that Luna might die if Tom tortured her, even though she was terrified, Hermione offered herself up in her friend's stead. "It was my fault. Please hurt me, not her."

"Very well."

Tom started to withdraw his wand only for Remus' voice to ring out. "No! I'll take her punishment for her."

"As will I," Justin added, Ron and Neville both echoing Justin's sentiment.

Tom smiled, although none could see it behind his mask. "Such gallantry shown for a Mudblood but I believe Lupin made the offer first and he also did try to interfere, so the honor will go to him."

Remus readied himself for what he knew was coming, although he didn't expect Tom to proffer his punishment to another.

"Severus, if you would fulfill Lupin's wish," Tom instructed, well aware of how much Severus hated Remus, although at that point he had no idea why, an oath Severus had sworn to Dumbledore keeping Remus' affliction a secret.

Severus promptly dropped Luna to the ground and, caught unawares, she screamed in pain as her head rebounded off the floor. He then gleefully turned his wand on Remus. "Crucio."

Remus gritted his teeth for as long as he could but the pain emanating from the hatred that was powering Severus' spell made it hard for Remus not to cry out and eventually he began to scream, his body straining and contorting against the spell.

As he watched, Tom was rather surprised by Remus' fortitude... even though he was screaming, he had not lost bodily control as most would. Once almost two minutes had gone by, Tom called a halt to the punishment. "Enough, I might need him sane."

"Yes, my Lord," Severus said, far from happy that his pleasure had come to an end, leaving Remus gasping and trying to suck in oxygen as a fish out of water might do. Flicking his wand, Severus ensured that Remus could not move by chaining his arms and legs, not trusting simple rope to keep a werewolf bound.

Meanwhile Tom had moved to crouch down in front of Hermione and his reason for keeping her alive came out. "I think you must be hiding a secret."

Hermione swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry as she once more came back to Tom's attention. "What..." She coughed a little trying to get her words out. "What do you mean?"

"You're not dying and we all supposed you to be a Mudblood, a little like your defender over there," Tom nodded in Justin's direction. "So, do you know why you're not dying?"

Hermione shook her head.

Tom grasped her chin. "I do believe you're lying to me." Squeezing her chin harder, he asked the question again. "Why aren't you dying?"

"Don't know," Hermione spat out, and then pain suddenly ripped through her head, adding to the pain in her cheeks inflicted by Tom's brutal grip.

Encountering resistance as he tried to read Hermione's mind, Tom decided to use a more painful method than Legilimency, and he turned his wand on Hermione, not letting anyone take her place this time. "Crucio."

Unlike Remus, Hermione had no idea of what sort of pain the Cruciatus Curse could inflict and almost immediately she began to scream, her head thrashing from side to side as her body strained against the Petrificus Spell that was holding her immobile. She was sobbing uncontrollably by the time Tom released the spell, a scant twenty seconds later.

"Let's try that again, shall we?"

More terrified of what Tom might try to do to her if she told him the truth than she was of the pain curse, Hermione still stood her ground and managed to again gasp out, "Don't know."

Tom gave her an exasperated look before once more quietly incanting, "Crucio." This time he held the spell for far longer before releasing it. "Again, do you know why aren't dying?"

With tears pouring down her cheeks, Hermione sucked air into her lungs, all of it having seemed to have vanished from screaming. When Tom raised his wand again, Hermione gave in and shrieked, "I didn't eat any chocolates!"

Tom then scanned the room before asking the question that Hermione suspected he might if he knew the truth about her omission. "Are there are any chocolates remaining?"

After searching the Great Hall, none were found, Luna's timely actions having prompted a complete eradication, even on the Slytherin table, although on that table, the destruction had been carried out by others than the Slytherins.

Tom beckoned to Severus, who quickly moved to Tom's side. "Do you have reserves, Severus?"

Severus suspected that he would be punished later for the answer he was about to give. "No, my Lord."

Tom decided that, as Severus had assumed, he would punish him later, mostly for lack of foresight. At that moment though, Tom glossed over the error and instead chose to put the fear of God into Hermione with his next comment.

"A pity. I'll have to figure out a different, much more painful way for the Mudblood bitch to die."

Tom then walked over to Justin, who was lying on the floor, his fists clenched in anger. "Potter's best friend and one of the Mudblood bitch's knights in shining armor. Get up."

Breaking into a cold sweat, Justin rose to his feet and, just as he had done with Hermione, Tom grasped Justin's chin. "Why didn't you eat the chocolates?"

"I did," Justin said, seeing no reason to lie.

"You're telling the truth," Tom noted in surprise after using Legilimency on Justin, just as he had had on Hermione, although this time he encountered little resistance. "So what dirty little secret are you hiding?"

Justin gasped in pain just as Hermione had done when Tom delved deeper into his mind. Unlike Hermione, however, Justin wasn't held immobile by a spell and he instinctively lashed out.

Tom stumbled backwards under the force of the blow to his shoulder. "You are going to pay for that."

And Justin did, screaming until he was sick, as Tom held the Cruciatus Curse on him for far longer than he had with Hermione. After releasing it, he snapped his fingers at his men. "Deal with this mess."

Severus swiftly got rid of the offending puddle before stepping back. Tom then retook his place and, leaning back against the Hufflepuff table, he resumed his questioning of a violently shaking and sobbing Justin. "Perhaps you'd like to tell me the truth now."

Hermione answered for Justin, afraid of what Tom might do to him if he couldn't respond. "His mother is a squib."

It certainly explained Justin's survival, and, although Tom would normally have continued his interrogation of Justin, he also had a timetable to which to keep, and so Tom accepted what he had been told. "A pity he chose to befriend Potter; he might have survived this."

Leaving the group behind him, Tom had one more person to deal with and he moved over to Luna, who was crying softly as she lay on the floor in the middle of the room. "And you, you silly little girl, despite your friends' noble efforts to save you, I'm afraid that won't be possible. You see, you tried to undo everything I've achieved tonight and, because of you, Potter's Mudblood bitch isn't going to experience the sort of death her kind deserves and I'm afraid that can't go unpunished."

He then aimed his wand at Luna, whose sobs of pain turned into frightened ones at the menace in the voice of the gold masked man.

"Exuo Magus."

A silvery glow linked Tom and Luna and, at the moment it turned red, Tom dropped the spell and turned away.

Remus, who knew what the spell had done, struggled against his chains, wishing he could comfort the weeping and bloody Luna. His anger overwhelming him, Remus barked out, "You bastard! She was only doing what she thought was the right thing."

"Well obviously it wasn't, was it," Tom declared. "And, as I am making the rules this evening, Lupin, I do believe that the latest one is that every time you or one of Potter's friends open their mouths and I don't like what I hear, then I won't punish you or them but someone else in their stead." Tom swiveled around slowly before making up his mind about his next target. "I think a teacher this time... the half-breed will suffice."

Remus begged Tom not to do it as he realized who Tom had chosen. "Please, no. It's not his fault; kill me instead."

"I'm afraid not, Lupin," Tom said, and he smiled as Remus closed his eyes in anguish when Tom then took aim at his chosen victim and incanted, "Avada Kedavra." He then walked over to Remus. "Any other derogatory remarks you might wish to make? We could always add other teachers or students to this example."

Not wishing for anyone else to die because of him, Remus said softly, "No, please don't."

Satisfied that he had gotten his point across, Tom flicked his wand and released Remus from the chains that Severus had placed around his feet. "In that case, you're going to go to what I understand is now your office, and, once there, you will hand over the wards of this school to Severus."

Remus immediately agreed to Tom's demands. "Very well."

Tom still hadn't finished. "However, if I discover that you refused when you get there or put up a fight of any kind, I will return and kill every single student in Gryffindor. Understood?"

Remus could sense that Tom was telling the truth and he therefore acknowledged Tom's question affirmatively. "Understood."

Tom turned away after ordering Severus to choose a Gryffindor pupil to use as a hostage as he escorted Remus upstairs. He then gave orders to his other men. "I want all of the remaining students in good health removed to their houses. Escort Potter and his friends out first."

In the throng of moving pupils, nobody noticed George Weasley, who was stooping, slipping out from the teachers' side room and joining the Hufflepuffs, who were the last house to be escorted out of the Great Hall. Once inside of Hufflepuff, everyone was ordered into their dormitories, and George followed Ernie MacMillan. Ernie thankfully had had the good sense to remain quiet and not to question George's presence on their way to Hufflepuff, instead doing his best to shield the rather flamboyantly dressed George from the eyes of those watching them.

Thankfully they made it into the sanctuary of the dormitory without any problem, and George began to question Ernie the moment the door to the room was locked behind them. "Who was that man in the gold mask?"

"You-Know-Who: Snape called him 'my Lord'," Ernie said, his voice shaking with fear as he dropped onto his bed. He glanced around the room. "I bet Wayne will be glad his parents pulled him out in third year."

"Who?" George asked, as he began to rummage through the trunk he knew to be Harry's.

"Wayne. He was the Muggle-born who used to share this room, but after the whole thing with the Basilisk and Harry going missing, his parents said it was too dangerous to come here anymore. It looks like they were right," Ernie said, wondering why George was ransacking Harry's trunk. "Um, what are you doing?"

George straightened up, Harry's cloak and the Marauders Map in his hand. "I needed these. I'm going to try and portkey out."

"But what about everybody else in Hufflepuff? We have to help them."

George disagreed. "If they do as they've been told they should be okay. I'm more concerned about those students I saw who were hurt. What happened to them?"

"There was something in the chocolates," Ernie explained. "I think it must have been poison meant for just the Muggleborns because You-Know-Who wanted to know why Hermione and Justin weren't dying."

Now George understood the comment about Wayne. "So he's trying to kill all of the Muggle-borns?"

"I think so," Ernie responded, before babbling on nervously. "When Hermione said she hadn't eaten the chocolates, You-Know-Who looked for more, and when he didn't find any he said he'd kill her by a different method. I thought Justin hadn't eaten the chocolates but it turns out that he did and that he wasn't ill because he isn't a Muggle-born after all because his mum is a squib."

George, who by now knew Cordelia very well, disagreed. "No, she isn't."

"Hermione must have lied then," Ernie guessed, before remembering something important. "Ooh! I almost forgot. You-Know-Who killed the Headmaster and Professor Lupin has to hand over the school to Snape."

At Ernie's comment, George swiftly opened up the Marauders Map and tapped it with his wand. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Ernie was surprised at what appeared on what had formerly been a blank piece of parchment. "It's us."

"It's everyone in Hogwarts," George told him. "We need to find out if Remus Lupin is still in the Great Hall."

"He is, he's standing with Snape and Lavender Brown, and there are lots of the students still in there, but some of their names are all jumbled up," Ernie said, trying to figure out the confusing tangle of names on the Map.

George held out his hand. "Then we're wasting time. Come with me and you can escape."

"I'm not leaving the others to die," Ernie said in a disgusted voice. "I don't have a wand but I do want to help."

"Sorry but I thought... forget what I thought." George grabbed Ernie's hand. "And you can help by coming with me. Let's pray that Remus doesn't key Snape into the wards before we get back."

At that moment time was on the young men's side since Remus was still in the Great Hall, watching in abject horror as a table was transfigured into a large, long cart and the sick students were being floated onto it, no care being taken as they were literally piled on top of each other as if they were nothing but bodies rather than living, feeling, human beings. What sickened him the most was that they dumped Filius' body on the cart as well.

Although he should have left a few minutes earlier, Tom had deliberately delayed his departure to his next port of call so that he could stand and watch, wanting Remus to understand that he was very serious in his threats. As Tom saw the despairing look on Remus' face, he spoke to Severus. "I trust I can leave you to finish things up here."

"Yes, my Lord," Severus hurriedly said, hoping to make up for his earlier transgression.

"Then I have an appointment with the Minister for Magic," Tom said, beckoning to the silver masked men who had accompanied him into Hogwarts, before he finally turned and left.

George and Ernie appeared in the small yard behind the twins' store in Diagon Alley, and then they vanished once more as George operated the return portkey, arriving in the teachers' side room that George had slunk out of a short time earlier.

George then glanced at the Map. "They're still in the Great Hall but there are loads of names I don't recognize; they must be guards. This is not going to be easy, and so we should put this around us before we leave," George said, tugging Harry's cloak out of his pocket.

Ernie frowned. "But we're indoors."

George draped the cloak around his shoulders before tugging it over his head and vanishing from sight, stunning the boy opposite him. "Just get under this with me. We're going out the back entrance – I didn't see any guards out there."

"And do what when we get out?" Ernie asked. "Everyone who is sick is still in the Great Hall."

"Harry and his friends aren't," George pointed out as he stuck his head out from under the cloak and prodded the Map. "You-Know-Who must have made sure they were taken out first."

Ernie looked down at the Map and he could see that, together with ten unfamiliar names, Harry and his friends were indeed moving down a hallway, the name of each sick or injured individual showing up in between two of their able bodied friends. "Where do you think they're taking them?"

"I don't know," George said but he made a guess, "although I'd say towards Slytherin. Now get under the cloak and let's follow them."

The two of them then made their way out of the room and into the hallway, George struggling to move efficiently under cover of the cloak. He was about to suggest removing it and relying solely on the Map now that they were away from the Great Hall, when he noticed on the Map four names appearing up ahead of them. They weren't, however, moving. "They must be guards."

"Keep your voice down," Ernie whispered as he also glanced at the Map. "We need to get past them if we're going to follow Harry."

"Then we have to do it without letting them know we're there, and if you keep sticking your arm out of this cloak you're going to give us away," George whispered back. "Loop your arm around my waist and make sure you stoop."

Yet again, Ernie did as he was told and the two boys hurried along as quickly as they could in their uncomfortable embrace, reaching the guards and realizing that they could indeed get around them. Carefully they edged their way along the wall, not releasing their collective breaths until they were far along the corridor. After letting

go of George and shaking off the cloak, Ernie held out his hand. "Let's take a look at the Map. We don't know where to go next."

"The Slytherin guest suite," George said, pointing to the Map before folding it up.

"We might need that," Ernie protested.

"I don't need it," George said. "I pretty much know this place inside out and as long as nothing changes, there are no guards in our way until we reach the room, so get back under here."

"But how will we deal..."

George cut him off. "We'll figure that out when we get there."

It wasn't long before the two would-be rescuers reached the door to the suite and they were both surprised to discover that the guards had left.

"Why aren't they guarding it?"

George referred back to the Map again and spotted the guards had moved into Slytherin. "They probably don't feel they need to but forget about them because we're running out of time. Remus and Snape are leaving the Great Hall."

"So how do we get into the Slytherin guest suite?" Ernie asked.

George grinned and pointed out the Slytherin guest suite on the Map. As he did, a bubble appeared by the door, and he spoke the words out loud that appeared in the bubble. "Slytherin victorious."

The door swung open and, just in case there were hidden dangers that the Map had failed to reveal, after pulling the invisibility cloak over them, George and Ernie headed inside.

Instead of a bed and a wardrobe, the Slytherin guest suite now had several cages in it, and in one of them was Hermione who was cradling an unconscious Luna, the blood from her cut coating Hermione's skirt, although Hermione had ripped the lower portion of it away to make a makeshift bandage for Luna's head.

Spotting a foot, Hermione said, "Take off the cloak, George."

George pulled the cloak off, a perturbed expression on his face as he had believed he had covered himself up. "How did you know it was me?"

"Your foot was showing," Hermione said, rising to her knees, the cage too small to stand in. "And you're the only person I know who wears dragon hide boots like that."

"Worry about boots later. Don't you think you should be getting them out?" Ernie asked. "You're the only one with a wand."

George aimed his wand at the lock on the door of Hermione's cage and used an unlocking spell he knew he could power. When that failed, he tried several others but he failed each time.

"I'm not powerful enough to make it work."

Hermione held out her hand. "Give the wand to me." George did as she asked and she aimed it at the door, using the same spell. She gave a small scream of frustration as nothing happened. "That should have worked!"

"You're too powerful for the wand," George guessed. "It's only barely above a trainer wand."

It was only then that Ron noticed that George's wand was different from his usual one. "Where's your other wand?"

George gave a sigh. "I had to replace it when I lost my power a while back, Ron." He held up his hand as his brother went to say something. "Not now, Ron. Let's just say I'm not a squib but I'm also not that powerful a wizard anymore."

Across the room, in a separate cage with Harry in his arms, Justin asked, "So how did you get in here?"

"Portkey", George said.

"But we tried my portkey so that we could get Susan and Parvati out," Neville said, having one that would take him to King's Cross station in the case of an emergency. "And it didn't work."

"At one time it would have, but the Headmaster changed things after Sirius Black attacked Harry as nobody knew how he got in. Mine is linked into the school wards," George explained. "And somehow I'm going to use it to get you all out before Remus keys that traitorous bastard into the wards."

"But we're behind bars," a red-eyed Padma, who was in yet another cage, pointed out. "And none of us has anything that will open the doors."

"Can I see the Map?" Hermione asked hurriedly. When George passed it to her, she looked down at it. "They're going up the stairwell to the Headmaster's office." She thought quickly. "George, what form does your portkey take?"

George pulled off a gold necklace, which Hermione grabbed from him. "What are you going to do?"

"Hope that I can enlarge it," Hermione said, pointing George's wand at the necklace, although her hand was shaking somewhat, an aftereffect of the Cruciatus Curse. "Professor Lupin has been showing me how to temper spells, so perhaps I can downgrade how much power I put through your wand."

"You're in no condition to try and I have enough power to cast an enlargement spell," George said, taking his wand and necklace back before aiming the wand at it. "Engorgio." The necklace grew but it still wasn't large enough and so George did it again. "Engorgio." He then opened up the necklace and handed it to Hermione. "Pass it through the bars."

Everyone moved quickly. Keeping an eye on the Map, Hermione threaded the necklace through the bars, the others repeating the action.

Hermione's eyes widened as she saw Remus' footprints nearing the fireplace. "George, activate the portkey now."

"But what about the others that are hurt?" Ernie asked. "They might be bringing them here."

"There's no time to wait if we're going to get out," Hermione yelled.
"George, do it now!"

"Jokers Pack," George called out.

The group vanished, and not a moment too soon, as a few moments later Remus touched the fireplace, handing over the wards of the school to Severus.

In the Headmaster's office, Severus turned on his wand on Remus.
"Now it's time to deal with you, Lupin."

Potter Place

After moving everyone into the twins' store, Hermione made the decision that they would all likely be safer in Potter Place and so between them, she and Ron began to side-apparate everyone there, Justin still shaking too much from the extended exposure to the Cruciatus Curse to concentrate.

Cordelia was more than a little surprised to see Justin in Ron's arms.
"Justie?"

Justin struggled against the tears that suddenly seemed to come out of nowhere. "We were attacked, Mum."

Cordelia wrapped her arms around Justin and hugged him, only to let him go when she saw the state of Luna. "Oh my God! Who did this to her?"

"Snape," Hermione said in a short voice as Cordelia checked the bloody makeshift bandage that adorned Luna's head. "Harry and Susan have been poisoned I think, and Luna's lost a lot of blood."

"I think you should get those affected into bed and then one of you should fetch Simon," Cordelia suggested, having met him on several occasions although she still had no idea about his alter ego.

Hermione knew that Cordelia was right, but she just hoped that Justin's mother wouldn't have a meltdown if she discovered who 'Simon' really was. "I'm not sure if he's in work. I'll need Macclesby's help to find him."

While Ron dealt with side-apparating his remaining friends into Potter Place, Macclesby was summoned and, after Hermione sketched out the situation, Macclesby told her that he knew that Healer Blackwell was in work.

"I will go fetch him, Miss Hermione."

Hermione quickly hurried into the study and penned a short missive. "Give this to Sirius and tell him it's urgent." She hesitated before handing the note over. "Be careful, Macclesby. We've already lost Remus; we don't want to lose you as well."

"I will be very careful, Miss Hermione," Macclesby said, and he took the letter before vanishing from sight.

St. Bart's

Sirius was more than surprised as Macclesby suddenly appeared behind him and Lilith, Macclesby holding up a letter for Sirius. "Miss Hermione wants you to have this. She said it's urgent, sir." He then vanished, intent on trying to locate Remus.

As Macclesby vanished, Sirius took the letter and quickly opened it, before paling. "I have to go. My godson and his friends need me."

"You have more than one casualty?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll come with you," Lilith immediately offered, surprising Sirius.

Aware that time was of the essence and not sure if he would need help or not, Sirius decided to take a chance and he grabbed Lilith's hand and disappeared.

Having heard a crack of apparition, Hermione ran out, and although she noticed the unknown woman with Sirius, she ignored her in order to inform him of the current situation. "Harry's upstairs but he's not doing so well."

Lilith recognized the young woman in front of her, and she quickly put two and two together, but she ignored her curiosity to do her job instead. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's been poisoned we think," Hermione told her, before turning back to Sirius. "Please take a look at him and Susan Bones as well."

Sirius vanished before Hermione could include Luna. She turned to Lilith. "I'm Hermione Granger and you look like a nurse."

"I'm Lilith Gosford and I am a nurse," Lilith said, shaking Hermione's hand.

"Then could you take a look at my friend?" Hermione asked, although there was something about this woman she didn't like. "She was cut badly and I'm not exactly au fait with healing spells."

Lilith had felt faint tremors when Hermione had shaken her hand. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm feeling better than I did," Hermione assured her, her concern for Luna utmost on her mind. "And I can wait until you've seen Luna."

"Then let's go take a look at your friend."

Sirius appeared in Luna's room a short time later. "Where's Lilith?"

"In the bathroom. She's treated me, Justin and Luna for our injuries," Hermione said, now back to normal after Lilith had given her a potion to alleviate her symptoms from the Cruciatus. "How are Harry and Susan?"

"Not good, but stable," Sirius said, turning as the bathroom door opened.

Lilith smiled brightly at Sirius. "You'll be pleased to hear that I've taken care of your godson, although it will be a few hours before Justin is back to normal again."

George, who had come by to check on a now sleeping Luna, looked strangely at Lilith and said, "Simon isn't Justin's godfather."

Lilith frowned. "But..."

"I think we need to talk," Sirius said, turning to Ron, who had joined George in checking in on Luna. "Would you mind coming with me, Ron?"

Ron didn't and followed Sirius out.

Once inside the study, Sirius closed the door behind the three of them and stood in front of it as he knew Lilith would not be able to disapparate from inside of the room. "You know who my godson is, don't you?"

"I think so," Lilith said sharply, her hand wavering just above her wand. "And if I'm right, then that would make you..." Lilith broke off, not quite able to believe that the man standing in front of her might be someone she believed to be dead, and worse, a murderer.

At her broken sentence, Sirius sighed and tapped his ring, his normal visage appearing. "It does."

Lilith blanched as she realized that her implausible fears were indeed founded. "Sirius Black!"

"Please," Sirius said hurriedly, holding up his hand. "This is not what it seems."

"Then what is it?" Lilith demanded, her hand closing around her wand. She gave a tiny moan. "Oh Merlin, I slept with you!"

"Accio wand," Sirius said swiftly, the wand flying across the room to him and Lilith backed away, fear on her face. "Lilith, I'm not going to hurt you but I can't leave you with a wand while I explain."

Before Lilith could respond, however, Ron gasped, withdrew his wand and yelled out, "Stupefy!"

Next Chapter: The reason behind Ron's actions is revealed; Sirius struggles to discover what is ailing Harry and Susan.

Sorry for the delay in getting this out but real life intruded. Hopefully the next update will be posted on Tuesday.

Chapter 54: Poison

As Lilith crumpled to the ground, Sirius turned on Ron in anger. "What the hell?"

"Don't you know who she is?" Ron asked, completely unperturbed by Sirius' fury.

"Of course I do," Sirius said slowly as if Ron was stupid. "Her name is Lilith Gosford and she's a nurse who works with me."

Ron shook his head. "She's more than that. She's Rita Skeeter's kid sister. Bill went out with her for a while but he found out she was just trying to pump him for information about Gringotts to pass on to her sister. I only met her once and she had blonde hair then but when I saw her in Luna's room I knew I recognized her although I couldn't remember who she was until just now."

"You're sure?"

Ron nodded towards the pensieve that sat on the top shelf of the bookcases in the study. "Have a look at my memory."

Sirius used the pensieve and, after viewing the memory, he groaned as he withdrew. "You're right. Dammit!"

"What will you do?"

"Oblivate her," Sirius decided, although his voice was heavy with regret. "I haven't got much choice."

It was then that Ron clicked why Sirius had probably brought Lilith with him. "Are you going out with her?"

"I am."

"Are you still going to go out with her?"

Lilith's identity made it nigh on impossible to do so. "I can't. She didn't tell me about Rita and, although I haven't been honest either, at least she could have been without risking her life."

A knock on the door interrupted them and Hermione came in. Whatever she had been about to say died on her lips as she spotted Lilith. "What happened to her?"

"I stunned her." Ron then explained why.

This set alarm bells ringing for Hermione. "She was in the bathroom for ages. Do you think she was up to something?"

"I'm not terribly good with Occlumency but I am quite a decent Legilimens," Sirius said, his voice grim. "Let's find out what she was doing."

They discovered that Hermione's concern had been well-founded, and that during her extended sojourn in the bathroom, Lilith had made notes, which she had hidden in her pocket, Sirius fishing them out. "Ron, Hermione, can you give us some time alone?"

The two of them left and Sirius closed the door again. "Rita's sister. You kept that quiet."

"No quieter than you kept your true identity," Lilith pointed out.

"I had a good excuse. What was yours?"

"Rita is hardly someone you want to advertise being related to," Lilith said truthfully.

"And yet you're still trawling for stories for her," Sirius said, waving the notes in Lilith's face. "Why?"

"She gives me a cut of whatever she makes for selling the story," Lilith said, her voice filled with embarrassment.

"And selling Harry's story would have made you a sweet Knut or two, wouldn't it?" Sirius' voice was filled with disgust. "And to think I really liked you and I thought you liked me as well."

"I do," Lilith admitted. "But the story about Potter being poisoned was too good to pass up."

"And mine would have been even better," Sirius said sadly.

"Yes," Lilith said, answering truthfully, before taking Sirius' hand and saying, "But I wouldn't have told Rita about you. I care too much about you to do that."

"I don't believe you," Sirius responded, his skepticism evident in his voice. "You didn't exactly seem thrilled to discover you'd slept with the infamous Sirius Black."

"Put yourself in my shoes," Lilith argued, as she was telling the truth about her feelings for Sirius. "I thought you were a healer and then I discover that in actual fact you're a killer."

"I brought Ron in to tell you differently," Sirius answered, "because I wanted to see if we could have made things work."

"We still can!"

"No," Sirius shook his head, "we can't. I don't think I could ever trust you again, and deep down you'd never be able to trust me."

"So what are you going to do?" Lilith asked, her voice suddenly beginning to shake as she realized the potential predicament she might be in, thus proving Sirius' hypothesis about trust correct.

"Not kill you, if that's what you're afraid of," Sirius told her, taking his wand out as he let go of Lilith's hand. "I'm going to obliviate you. You'll simply be told that my godson had a small accident, which we took care of together."

"But there won't be any more together for us, will there?"

"There won't," Sirius confirmed regretfully. "I'll distance myself from you and you'll move on as will I."

"And will you tell anyone about Rita?"

"No, that's none of my business anymore," Sirius said, before stepping away from Lilith. "I'm sorry."

"So am I." Lilith then prepared herself.

Sirius softly uttered, "Obliviate."

After he had returned Lilith to the hospital, Sirius sought out Ron and Hermione. "Lilith has gone. I obliviated her."

"What did you tell her?" Hermione asked.

"That my godson is someone named Jack and that he and his friend, Matthew, took a minor tumble down the stairs that required my presence." Sirius then tapped his ring assuming his true persona. "And after what happened with Lilith, I've decided that it's time to be honest with everyone in this house."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Hermione asked a little apprehensively.

"No," Sirius said. "But I'm fed up of hiding behind a façade. It's bad enough lying to everyone I work with, and I don't want to have to do the same here as I suspect Harry and Susan are going to need me around for quite some time." He then helped himself to a glass of water. "I'd prefer Scotch but I think I need to keep a clear head especially after what's happened with Lilith."

Ron put a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry about her."

"Better to have found out now," Sirius said and he smiled at Ron. "You saved me from what could have been a nasty situation. Thanks."

"I feel bad about it," Ron admitted.

"Don't," Sirius said. "What's done is done. Now let's go and check on Harry and Susan, and then I want to run some tests."

"I'll help you with them," Hermione offered.

As they walked out of the sitting room they were met with the sound of a gasp and Sirius came face to face with Padma, Parvati and Ernie, who were all staring at him.

"You're..." Then Ernie remembered that Sirius had been executed, and his expression became confused. "Who are you?"

"You were right the first time. I'm Sirius Black," Sirius announced, not in the mood to play games. "Yes, you thought I was executed. Yes, I survived. No, I'm not a bad guy. Yes, I'm here to help."

It was left to Ron to brief the trio on Sirius' appearance, while Sirius headed back upstairs with Hermione.

Neville was the first in the patients' rooms to be greeted by the sight of Sirius Black, and he was about to put himself between Sirius and Susan when he noticed that Hermione was with Sirius and that she looked very comfortable and not at all afraid. "Um, what's going on?"

Hermione did the talking. "Sirius has been masquerading as Simon. He's innocent of anything you think he might have done, and Harry rescued him from the Ministry of Magic with Remus, Ron and Justin."

"Hermione helped as well," Sirius said, giving credit where it was due. "Now that you know who I really am, do you have a problem with me continuing to treat Susan?"

Neville decided that if Harry had helped to rescue someone who had tried to kill him, then Sirius must be okay. He also had little other choice in the matter if he wanted Susan to survive. "No."

"Thank you," Sirius said and he headed over to the bed.

His second port of call was to Harry's room, where Cordelia was treated to the same story but in more detail as she took a little more convincing but Justin's seconding the story was eventually enough for her to begin to accept Sirius. However, still unnerved, she excused herself and headed off to Susan's room.

After checking over Harry, Sirius and Hermione both went back downstairs to give the others a brief rundown on the situation, Sirius taking point. "They're both still stable and I've given them something for the pain, and, although I can't say for certain until I run some tests, I suspect they've definitely been poisoned."

"Do you think Snape did this?" Parvati asked.

Sirius nodded. "Without a doubt, although he's not the brains behind..."

Ernie interrupted. "It has to be You-Know-Who who's the brains. Snape called him 'my Lord' and he was helping him."

Given what he had been told about a gold masked man, Sirius was pretty certain it was the man who had imprisoned him. "You-Know-Who has never had a problem revealing he was behind atrocities before. It's unlikely he'd hide behind a mask now. And Snape was always a coward who gravitated towards the most powerful force in charge, so his involvement can't be used to confirm that it is Lord Voldemort."

Neville came into the room. "Cordelia has said she's going to sit with Susan for a while as she thinks I might be more useful down here."

"We were just talking about who might have attacked Hogwarts," Sirius told him. "But I don't think it's You-Know-Who."

"So who do you think it is?" Parvati asked in frustration.

Sirius shrugged. "I can't tell you but that should tell you everything."

"It's the man who forced you to kill those people," Hermione said, easily decrypting Sirius' message. "And that would mean not risking Harry and Susan at St. Mungo's."

Sirius ran a hand over his face. "And given what we've just learnt about Lilith, taking them to St. Bart's would be just as risky. In fact I think any hospital would be risky."

Mentioning hospitals made Neville realize something. "Simon, err, Mr. Black, my Gran should be safe at Longbottom Manor but my parents are at St. Mungo's. They're in the long term ward."

Sirius tapped his ring assuming his Simon persona before he vanished, returning a good ten minutes' later, dropping his disguise as he arrived back. "I'm afraid the nurse I spoke to said that your grandmother took your parents out of the hospital about fifteen minutes ago." He had even worse news. "And so I went to Longbottom Manor - I knew it from when I was friends with your parents. I'm so sorry, Neville, but it's been destroyed. They must have discovered you'd all escaped."

"I'm going to go back and sit with Susan." His voice breaking, Neville turned on his heel and left the room.

Neville had barely been gone two minutes when Justin suddenly appeared with a loud crack. "Harry just had a sort of fit."

Not yet able to apparate, Padma ran towards the stairs while Justin and Sirius disappeared, Hermione right behind them. After checking a pale and clammy Harry over, Sirius cast several spells on him. "That should hold him for a while but to be honest, I'm not sure it's going to help for long. Padma, if you could sit with Harry? I need to check on Susan but I'll be straight back after that."

"We'll both sit with him," Justin said and he sat down next to his girlfriend as Sirius left to head to Susan's room.

Susan, if it was possible, looked even worse than Harry, and Cordelia, who was comforting a tearful Neville, told Sirius that Susan had had several convulsions that had ended a few moments ago, and so Sirius cast the same spells on her as he had on Harry, before he turned as Hermione came in. "Susan seems to be much worse than Harry, or has he had another convulsion?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, but I forgot with the Lilith thing – can you check out Luna? Lilith healed her cuts and everything but our big bad cast a spell on her."

"Do you remember what it was?"

Hermione nodded, already half suspecting what the spell had done. "Exuo Magus."

"Fuck!" Sirius apparated out of the room, once again Hermione close behind him.

Upon appearing in the room where Luna was lying on her bed, now that he no longer had his disguise in place, Sirius was not surprised to see shock on Luna's face and it was echoed in George's, who was keeping Luna company. "What the hell is going on?"

Sirius, who had already pulled out his wand in readiness for checking Luna, tried to placate George. "I'm just trying to help, and right now I'm the only person with a wand who can."

Ron, who had just come into the room, hurried to reassure George. "It's just Simon but without his disguise. He's on our side, George, and it's a long story I can tell you later."

Hermione noticed that despite Ron's reassurance, George still had his wand held out in front of him. "George, please move."

"But he's Sirius Black," George argued, his concern for Luna outweighing his commonsense.

Ron scowled at his brother when he didn't. "For goodness sake, George, just bloody well move! You know you can't defend Luna if you can't cast strong spells and Sirius is going to help her."

Luna weakly grabbed George's arm. "George, it's okay. I trust him."

Aware of Luna's feelings about people usually being spot on, and with both Ron and Hermione defending Sirius, George moved and lowered his wand, letting Sirius by.

Sirius ran his wand over Luna, swearing as he could barely detect any magic at all. "Damn him to hell!"

"Am I going to die?" Luna asked in a fearful voice.

"No, but I suspect most, if not all, of your magic has been taken," Sirius said in a gentle voice. "I'm afraid that you're likely now a squib. And I don't mean to seem callous, Luna, but I really have to get back to Harry and Susan to check on some spells I've just cast, as their condition is life threatening and yours is not." He then vanished.

George gave Luna a pitying look, understanding how terrifying this was for the girl and how courageous she was being. "I'm really sorry, Luna."

"At least I'm not dead," Luna responded, trying to be brave as she thought about her head of house. Then, trembling, she got up off the bed, asking a question of Hermione, who had been about to return to Harry's side. "Can you try and contact Daddy at the Quibbler's offices for me, please? I want to go home."

After heading downstairs to collect the floo powder box, Hermione threw some multi-purpose floo powder into the fireplace on her

return to Luna's room and managed to get a link, before stepping aside to let Luna talk to her father.

"Daddy!"

Xenophilius was more than a little surprised to see his daughter. "Where are you, angel?"

"At Harry's house. Hogwarts has been attacked and I've lost my magic, Daddy," Luna said, wanting to cry at the sight of her father's head. "Can I come through?"

Tears coming to his eyes, although he wanted Luna with him, Xenophilius shook his head and refused. "You can't right now. If Hogwarts has been attacked then I want you in the safest place possible. Just stay there and I'll be in touch. I love you."

"I love you too, Daddy," Luna said, and she then burst into tears as the connection was broken.

Hermione immediately put her arms around the girl. "At least you know he's safe. Neville's parents have vanished from St. Mungo's, and Longbottom Manor has been destroyed."

The thought that his own family might be in danger suddenly occurred to Ron, and he grabbed a handful of the floo powder, throwing it into the fireplace and calling out, "The Burrow." There was no answer although he tried several times. Ron therefore grabbed another handful of floo powder. "I'm going to find out where Mum is." And before anyone could stop him, he jumped into the fireplace and yelled out the 'The Burrow'.

George ran across the room and also took some of the same floo powder. "I'm going after him."

Hermione let go of Luna and grabbed his arm. "You can't defend yourself, George."

"Neither can Ron without a decent wand," George barked.

Hermione shoved the spare wand she had thankfully kept at Potter Place into George's hand. "Then give him this."

"Thanks." He then also stepped into the fireplace and vanished.

It was less than five minutes later when, with white and tearful faces, Ron and George re-appeared, and Ron pulled out a tiny clock that he enlarged with George's old wand, which George had kept for nostalgic reasons, meaning Ron was able to give Hermione her wand back. "I think the Ministry must also have been attacked... Percy's dead. Mum was supposed to be meeting Dad and Fred there today for a meal and so we tried to floo there and couldn't get in."

Hermione glanced at the clock that showed Harry as being in mortal danger; Arthur Weasley's hand indicated he was in work; Molly's and Fred's hands both said 'out'; Charlie's and Bill's hands indicated that they were at work; and Ginny's hand read at school. "At least wherever your parents and Fred are, they're not in mortal danger, although I think we should warn Charlie."

After coaching George and Ron and then collecting some international floo powder from downstairs, Hermione established a connection and told Charlie to stay where he was after explaining that Harry was sick and that they had no idea if it was contagious. Her main reason for not wanting him there was that she didn't want to reveal Sirius' existence to anyone else after the Lilith debacle.

Aware of Hermione's reasons, George and Ron then both spoke to their brother, affirming Hermione's words. Charlie therefore promised to try and track down Bill after hearing about Percy's death and the remainder of his family's disappearance, before he ended the connection.

"Is there a chance that Harry really might be contagious or was it purely just to keep Charlie away because of the Lilith thing?" George asked, feeling almost numb as Luna slipped her hand into his.

"The latter. I don't want anyone else knowing about Sirius, not even Charlie. The more people who know that Sirius is alive, the more danger he's in."

"Is there anything we can do now that you've lost another pair of hands?" Luna asked, her concern about her friends overriding her own worries.

"Not right now, Luna. You need to rest. Sirius is going to run some tests and I'm going to help him. For some reason Harry is doing much better than Susan."

Luna stiffened as she suddenly realized something. "Is he wearing his cufflinks?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, a little annoyed at herself for not thinking of the obvious, and she vanished to return to Harry's room, coming back moments later. "Yes."

"Then he should hopefully survive if it's a poison," Luna said, praying she was right. "I just hope Simon, I mean Sirius, can help Susan."

Although George had been shocked to see Sirius, he was now relieved to have him there. "Even though seeing him was a bit of a bolt from the blue, I'm glad Black is here to be honest. There are no other adults to help us, not magical ones anyway."

In the potions room in the basement, it was about an hour later that Sirius tiredly ran a hand over his face. "It's definitely a blood based poison but I can't isolate exactly what sort of poison." He turned around to face Hermione. "You said it was only Harry, Susan and the Muggle-borns who were affected and that it was definitely in the chocolates?"

Hermione shivered. "Whoever was behind that mask would have force-fed me chocolates if there had been any left, so, yes, it was definitely in the chocolates. I escaped this because I won't usually eat anything but sugar free sweets and chocolate."

"Then I think that this poison is keyed to a marker of some kind in the Muggle-borns' blood and that somehow Snape got hold of Harry's and Susan's blood to include it in the poison with which he laced the sweets," Sirius deduced.

Hermione thought differently. "But Justin is a Muggle-born and he's still alive, although he admitted to our attacker that he'd eaten the sweets."

"That means that Justin was lying..."

"I think our attacker used Legilimency on us; he certainly did on me and it hurt horribly," Hermione revealed. "And he seemed to know that Justin was telling the truth."

"In that case, perhaps Justin picked up every single sweet that wasn't tainted for some reason, but to be honest I very much doubt that would be the case," Sirius said, as he worked through the logical possibilities, "which leaves us to draw the conclusion that Justin isn't a Muggle-born..."

Hermione interrupted him yet again. "I told our attacker that Cordie is a squib but we both know she's not, so that would mean..."

Sirius took his turn to interrupt. "That Justin's father was a wizard, or, although it's a long shot, he's naturally immune to whatever this poison is."

Deciding to run with the last premise, Justin was hauled out of Harry's room and his blood tested. "So, am I immune?"

Sirius shook his head. "Not naturally, no, so I believe you survived for the same reason that George and Ron did."

Justin frowned. "I thought I survived because Mum is almost a squib – that chap who attacked me seemed to believe it when Hermione said Mum was."

"Then let's test her blood," Hermione suggested, not wanting to be the one to have to tell Justin the truth, although she believed he had already begun to figure it out.

Once in the potions room, Cordelia had the situation explained to her and she visibly drooped. "Oh God!"

"Mum?"

"Justie, I don't need blood tests to tell me that it's because of me you survived, because it's not."

"I still would like to run some tests," Sirius said, although he suspected his theory about Justin's survival was going to be proved correct.

Cordelia therefore stood and waited while Sirius ran tests before he shook his head. "You're right. Justin didn't survive because of you."

"Then how?" Justin asked, although he suspected he already knew the truth but he needed to hear it from his mother.

"Your birth father, he wasn't Edward," Cordelia whispered.

"It certainly explains why we never got along that well," Justin said almost bitterly.

Cordelia was in tears as she said, "I'm sorry, Justie. I never wanted you to find out like this."

Aware that Cordelia had some explaining to do, Sirius made a suggestion. "We don't need you here anymore, so why don't you go into the study and talk."

As Cordelia led her son off, Hermione was already considering the ramifications of what they had just learnt. "This means that Snape definitely managed to isolate something in the Muggle-borns' blood and use it to kill them. It's obviously also why our attacker thought I should be dead. But what about Harry and Susan? I can understand why Snape would want Harry dead but not Susan."

"I suspect her blood was the test subject for the potion or it was because of who her aunt is," Sirius deduced, although he was more concerned about what the poison was rather than the reasons behind its use. "Now I know there's a potion for killing someone by use of their bloodline, but I can't recall it."

Hermione thought hard. "I don't know of anything. What is the poison doing to them?"

"From what I can tell, it's eating away at them internally," Sirius said softly, aware of how upsetting this was going to be to Hermione. "And right now, even though I'm slowing its progress, there's not a damn thing I can do to stop it from eventually doing the job for which it was intended. Harry, however, seems to be fighting, ironically I imagine because of the cufflinks Susan gave to him, but to be honest I don't know if he'll succeed or not."

Hermione's stomach lurched over. "If he doesn't, then how long does he have?"

"I don't know about Harry, but Susan has only got days," Sirius surmised. "However, without knowing exactly what the potion is, I can't make a definitive estimate." Sirius then swore as the blood under his wand fizzled and turned black. "I need a tissue sample." He then vanished.

Hermione waited patiently for Sirius to return before asking, "Who is that from?"

"Harry," Sirius said, placing the small sliver of flesh he had taken from an unconscious Harry onto the slab in front of him.

Hermione watched in fascination as Sirius began to dissect it, before running various tests on each tiny sliver. As with the blood, the flesh turned black in each case.

Although she was cleverer than most, Hermione had no advanced training in potions and she therefore had to ask, "What does this mean?"

"It means that whatever this poison is, it's not only in their blood but it's also being absorbed by their tissues. I was hoping to be able to do some sort of blood transfusion but this means it's impossible," Sirius said, slumping down. "I need to find out what the potion used was."

After alerting all of the others, everyone headed into the Potter library and worked into the night, George eventually finding the answer. "I think I have it. It's the Trucido Progenius Potion, and it's usually used as a retribution potion when one bloodline has wronged another."

Sirius held out his hand for the book. "Let me see." After reviewing the potion and discovering the symptoms were an identical match, his face fell. "There's supposed to be no cure and, without treatment to prolong life, death usually occurs within 48 hours."

Luna paled. "Then those Muggle-borns left behind are going to die, aren't they?"

"Yes," Sirius said softly. "I'm afraid they are, and it's not going to be pleasant."

"What do you mean?" Neville asked in alarm.

"Forget I said that," Sirius responded, having spoken without thinking.

Hermione promptly snatched the book from Sirius and she went even whiter than Luna. "It says that the victim will die in agony, even with treatment for the pain."

Sirius stood up. "I refuse to believe that we can't do anything. I've got to get back to the lab and keep trying."

"I'll help you," Hermione said, rising to her feet.

"As will I," George said.

Padma also stood up. "You're not going to be able to keep going without sleep and so, as I'm also good with potions, I'll help out. One of you should get some rest and we can rotate."

Sirius agreed and he decided who should get some rest first. "Hermione and George, get some sleep. I'll take a break after four hours and then Padma can rest. We'll keep going that way."

Two Days Later

An exhausted Sirius threw down his wand in frustration. "Nothing I try is working."

George yawned and uncorked a pepper-up potion, knocking the contents back. "I'm going to make the suspension potion that Luna found in that book last night... it might buy us more time."

"You do realize that even if you manage to make it in time, if you give them that, you might interfere with the poison already inside of them?" Sirius warned, having already rejected the idea once.

"What other choice do we have?" Hermione asked, backing George up. "You said yourself that Susan is failing far more quickly than Harry."

"She is," Sirius confirmed.

"Then we should get moving," George decided, aware that the potion took at least three days to make. "If you tell me what I need, I can make a start on the potion. You should wake Padma and get some sleep."

Sirius put a stop to George's suggestion. "It's supposed to be your turn to rest, George. I will make the potion and Hermione can help me."

George shook his head. "I want to stay and help."

Sirius could see that he was going to get nowhere if he wasted time arguing and so he opened up the book that George had taken from Luna. "Okay. In that case, I'll need six leaves of blood orchid."

George began to move around the lab, picking up a container with the blood orchid in it. "We only have three leaves in here. Do we have any more of this?"

Sirius shook his head worriedly. "No, so there's only enough to make one dose with this."

"Can't you get some more?" Hermione asked.

George consulted the book. "This says that the blood orchid blooms only once every seven years in Borneo, and I doubt we'll be able to obtain more in time. Unless either of you know of any supplies."

Sirius disappeared before returning five minutes later with cobwebs in his hair. "I tried the potions labs at both Black homes but no luck, I'm afraid."

"Then we'll just have to go with what we've got," Hermione decided, not willing to risk anyone's life by venturing out into the wizarding world at large.

George walked over with the cauldron Hermione had asked for just before Sirius had returned. "Tell us what else you need..."

Harry's Room

Once the potion was left to simmer for eight hours, having been told that Hermione and Padma could manage, George and Sirius had been ordered out of the potions room. Although he was exhausted, George had therefore headed to Harry's room to take a turn at watching over his friend.

Luna was already there, sitting wrapped up in a shawl as she read a book about exotic plants. "You look tired."

"I am," George admitted. "But I've also taken so much pepper-up potion that it will be a while before I'll be able to sleep and so I thought I'd check up on Harry."

"Do they need any help in the lab?" Luna asked.

George shook his head. "No. Sirius and I were kicked out after we completed the initial stages of the suspension potion you found. After talking it through, we've decided that we're going to use it to try and save Susan."

"What about Harry?" Luna reached over and took Harry's hand as she asked.

"Sirius is hoping that Harry will survive because of his cufflinks," George said.

Luna felt sick at the thought of losing Harry. "But what if he's wrong, George? What if he doesn't make it?"

"You can't think that," George said, even though he was fearful of the same thing.

"We can't lose anyone else," Luna said on a sob. "We've already lost all those Muggle-borns who were left behind, Neville's parents and grandmother, your brother, Professor Flitwick and Remus. I can't bear it if Harry dies as well."

George was a little at a loss as Luna began to sob heavily. But recalling how his mother usually dealt with his sister when she was upset, George took a page out of his mother's book and gruffly made a demand as he tugged Luna to her feet. "Come here."

Luna promptly plastered herself to George, sobbing into his chest. "It's all too horrible."

George clumsily put his arms around her, patting her back. "There, there."

If Luna could have seen George's comforting smile, which looked more like a painful grimace, she would have smiled. However she could see nothing but his grey sweatshirt as she sobbed into it.

It was almost twenty minutes later before she finally reached the stage where she was able to stop crying. Pulling out of George's embrace she stared at the wet and snotty mess his sweatshirt was in. "If I still had my magic I could clean that."

Watching Luna's lips start to tremble again, George hurried to try and make her feel better. "It's okay. It's just an old thing and if it comes down to it, I can shove it in the wash or chuck it in the bin."

Luna made a concerted effort to pull herself together. "How do Muggles do it?"

"Do what?" George asked, his voice muffled as he tugged off his soggy sweatshirt, deciding that maybe it could do with a wash after all as it had been on his back for two days straight.

Luna made clear what she had meant. "Cope without magic."

"I don't know," George said, shrugging his shoulders. "But I do know that I wouldn't have managed without Cordie's help." Remus had introduced the two of them as he thought that Cordelia's perspective of the Muggle world might help George to deal with his diminished magical status.

"But you're not really a Muggle," Luna reminded him.

"I might as well be for some things," George answered. "I mean even though I can make some potions and cast low level spells it's not exactly the same as being fully magical, and Cordie has been filling me in on some of the stuff I might find useful."

It was the wrong thing to say and Luna's eyes welled up again as she began to panic. "How am I going to live without magic? I just can't, George. I just can't."

Recognizing that things were going to get out of hand again if he failed to do something, George said in a determined voice, "Yes, you can. Cordie manages just fine."

"But she's never been magical," Luna protested, her voice a little breathless with anxiety. "I'm going to be useless."

"No, you're not," George argued. "And there are lots of things that Muggles have that are like magic."

Even though she had close ties to students who were either Muggle-born or half-bloods, Luna had never really contemplated how Muggles managed. "Like what?"

George thought for a moment before coming up with something Luna could identify with. "Fridges. Wizards use spells to power fridges to keep food cool and Muggles use electricity to do the same thing."

"And what else?" Luna demanded to know.

"Muggles don't have broomsticks and apparition," George said after a moment's thought. "So they use cars, trains and airplanes."

"Airyplanes are those metal things that fly, aren't they?" Luna asked, having spotted them from the gardens of Potter Place.

"They're called airplanes," George said, correcting Luna. "And they can go high into the sky, even higher than broomsticks." He thought of something else. "And Muggles have rockets that go to the moon."

Luna thought that George was fibbing. "George, I'm not stupid. You can't go to the moon."

"Muggles have," George said firmly, having read about it in a book Cordelia had given him. "In 1969 a man named Armstrong was the first Muggle to walk on the moon."

Seeing how serious George was, Luna realized he was telling the truth and she was rather enchanted by the idea. "I wish I could go to the moon."

"I wouldn't want to go," George said, his love of discovery being outweighed by the dangers of which he was aware. "People have died."

"But we'd be able to portkey to safety," Luna pointed out. "Or at least I think I would."

"I think NASA would get a shock if you just vanished," George said, guffawing at the idea of it.

"What's NASA?" Luna asked, not au fait with the acronym.

George could not remember for what the term was short and so he opted to explain in general terms. "They're the people who run the Muggle space stuff."

"Oh," Luna said, before deciding she wanted to know more. "What else can Muggles do?"

George spent almost two hours covering everything he could think of from light bulbs to telephones to guns, but eventually he ran out of steam. "I'm sure there are lots more things but I don't know everything."

The pair were disturbed by Sirius coming in to check in on Harry. "Are you doing okay?"

"Yeah," George said. "Harry hasn't moved."

Sirius made a check of Harry, and then Luna, who was still tiring easily, a side effect of her loss of magic. "I dropped by Susan's room before I came here. She's still stable; I thought you'd like to know."

Luna gave a grateful smile. "Thanks."

Sirius squeezed Luna's shoulder. "I have more research to do but I'll drop by later." He noticed how much calmer Luna looked and he guessed it had something to do with George, who Sirius believed had feelings for Luna and vice versa; Luna had had several panic

attacks over the previous few days that only George had seemed to be able to help with, and Sirius therefore made a snap decision. "George, you can stay here and perhaps try and get some sleep. I doubt we'll need you but if we do I'll let you know."

Once Sirius left, George sat down on the edge of the chaise longue. "Do you want me to stay?"

Luna nodded hurriedly. "If you wouldn't mind. Having you around and talking to me really helps."

"I don't mind at all. That's what friends are for," George said, not understanding that, as Sirius had guessed, his feelings for Luna actually went deeper than mere friendship. "I understand how awful it is for you right now and I'm going to do whatever it takes to get you through this."

In tears again, Luna slipped her hand into his. "I'm glad I have you."

George squeezed Luna's hand before releasing it as he was suddenly hit by a wave of exhaustion, the pepper-up finally wearing off and he yawned. "I think I need to lie down."

Luna patted the chaise longue. "Take this."

"You're supposed to be lying down on this," George reminded her.

"I can take the sofa," Luna offered but she smiled as George tugged her down so that she was lying on the chaise with him but not against him.

"It's big enough for the both of us, the sofa's too small," George said and he yawned again. "Going to sleep now."

Almost as if someone had flicked a switch, George's breathing evened out and within moments he was sound asleep. As Luna covered him up with her blanket, she was hit with an intense emotion and she knew in that moment that she wanted to be more than just George's friend. After kissing him on his forehead, she slipped his arm around her waist and gave a contented sigh as George unconsciously closed the gap between them by pulling him against her.

Sirius simply smiled at the sleeping pair when he went back in to check on Harry a short time later and set up wards to warn him of any problem before placing a second blanket over the couple and letting them sleep.

Next Chapter: Potter Place receives an unexpected addition. Neville has a tough decision to make.

Note: The blood orchid comes from the movie 'Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid'.

Chapter 55: Turncoat

18th April 1997

Hogwarts

Ginny Weasley swept silently through the corridors. At this time of night the only people usually around were the guards, not that anyone dared to leave their rooms anymore, Gryffindor having lost two sixth years to a brutal demonstration after a failed escape attempt, and the remaining three students from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw who had been with them were being held to await their execution. She soon reached the door of the Slytherin guest suite and let herself in using the password she had gleaned by eavesdropping on Tom.

Although he could neither hear nor see anyone in the darkened room, Remus knew someone had come into the room and he called out, "Who's there?"

"Shh," Ginny hissed as she cast a dim lighting spell so that she could see. "I'm here to help you escape."

"I can't leave the students," Remus immediately said.

"If you don't," Ginny warned, "you'll be executing three of them in an arena they're building outside for you."

Remus instantly worked out what Ginny meant and, armed with this information, Remus now understood why he was still alive when he had expected to die long before now. "So you know what I am?"

"Yes," Ginny whispered.

"So why are you helping me?" Remus asked. "You're obviously on their side, Miss Weasley."

Ginny realized she had failed to cover her scent. "I have a potion that might help Harry if he's still alive. I don't know where he is, but I know you do, even though you refused to tell the Dark Lord." She knew from Blaise that Remus had endured some rather grueling torture at the hands of Tom as well Severus but he had refused to crack and tell them where Harry might be.

"And if I do know where Harry is, how do you propose I escape?"

"I don't know," Ginny had to admit. She hadn't thought that far ahead. "I can get you out of here, but after that you're on your own."

"What about your magical signature?" Remus asked, bringing up a problem he wondered if Ginny had considered, especially given her lack of foresight in helping him to break out. "Don't you think Voldemort will notice that you used your wand to help me escape?"

"I stole a wand from one of the Death Eaters," Ginny said calmly, although inside she felt anything but calm.

Remus' eyes narrowed as he caught onto something he had initially missed, the stench of his own blood helping to mask the scent of another. "Is that why you smell of blood?"

Ginny came clean about what she had done. "Yes. I hit the Death Eater from behind. Then I killed him."

Remus would have done the same but didn't reveal this to Ginny. "You killed a fellow Death Eater?"

"I killed a Death Eater, but I'm not one." Ginny refrained from adding 'not yet'. She then aimed her wand at the cage, even though Remus couldn't see her. "Before I release you, I need your promise that you won't attack me."

"I give you my word that if you release me I won't attack you without good reason," Remus agreed.

"You don't trust me, do you?" Ginny asked, as she released the lock on the cage door, hoping that Remus would be true to his word.

Remus was, and he answered Ginny's question negatively. "No, but what did you expect after you took their side?"

Ginny had to admit that Remus had a good point. "After what's happened, I don't suppose I could expect anything else."

"Did you know what Snape was going to do?" Remus asked as he climbed out of the cage, pulling the remains of his tattered shirt on as he stretched out his cramped limbs.

"Yes," Ginny answered honestly. "But I didn't agree with it, and I could do nothing to stop it."

"And you didn't think about warning anyone?" Remus asked in a cold voice.

"I would have died before I could have told anyone," Ginny said in her own defense. "I did all that I could."

"By standing back and letting those children die?" Remus didn't bother to hide his disgust as he asked the question.

"There was nothing I could do."

Remus frowned in the dim light as he laced up his boots. "Nothing?"

Ginny could hear the sarcasm in Remus' voice. "No, nothing." She then moved to another topic, not wanting to dwell on the deaths of the Muggle-borns. "If you get out, please tell my family I'm sorry."

Remus could feel Ginny's worry, and he made a guess. "You're concerned for them, aren't you?"

"Yes," Ginny nodded. "I know that somehow Ron got out from here, but Dad and Percy work at the Ministry."

Remus went rigid as Tom had only mentioned Harry when he had been torturing him to try to find out Harry's whereabouts. "Ron got out?"

"Yes, as well as some of the others. But I'm sure you'll find out more when you get free as we don't have the time to discuss this now." She then placed the vial of potion on the floor by Remus. "This is the potion."

"How do I know that this potion isn't a poison?" Remus asked, most definitely not trusting Ginny.

"Because Harry is going to die in agony from the potion he's already been given," Ginny said desperately. "And risking my life to give you another vial of poison to take to him would be a waste of my time."

Remus knew she was holding something back but given that time was of the essence, he took her at her word and held out his hand. "Can I have that wand you took?"

As Ginny released the wand, the invisibility spell was cancelled on it and it appeared in Remus' hand.

"Your best bet is to somehow get out through the Astronomy Tower. There are usually no guards there as it's too high to escape off."

Remus had no intention of using the Astronomy Tower. "How many guards outside of each house?"

"It varies," Ginny told him. "From two to six."

"That's good enough," Remus said, well aware that he could easily take on that many if he had the element of surprise.

Ginny turned towards the door. "I'd better go. I don't want Severus to come to my room and notice I'm missing."

Remus questioned why Severus would be in Ginny's room. "You're sleeping with him?"

"That's disgusting!" Ginny exclaimed in horror, before she explained why Severus might drop by. "I'm sleeping with Blaise, and he's the one that Severus might want."

"Why did you do it, Ginny?" Remus asked quietly.

"I fell for the wrong person," Ginny said with a soft sigh. "I didn't know what I was getting into until it was too late to back out."

Remus knew that again she wasn't being wholly truthful and he found himself questioning her true intentions. "I know you're not being entirely honest."

"Look, whether I am or not," Ginny said urgently, "you're going to run out of time if you don't go now. Someone may have already discovered what I've done."

Remus grabbed her hand, judging correctly where she was standing and he removed the invisibility spell as well as summoning her wand. "I'm afraid that's not good enough. You're coming with me."

"Let go of me!" Ginny's tone was frantic as she tried to extricate herself from Remus' grip. "You said you wouldn't hurt me."

"You seem to suffer in life from the same problem you did in class, Miss Weasley: you lack foresight and you don't listen properly. What I actually said was that I wouldn't attack you without good reason. I didn't say I wouldn't use you as a shield or a hostage, which is exactly what I intend to do," Remus told Ginny as he dragged her towards the door. "A word of warning: If you somehow manage to let anyone know what we're up to during our escape, I promise that I'll consider such an action to be good reason and I'll kill you for it."

"You bastard!" Ginny hissed struggling in vain. "I'm trying to save you."

"No, you're not," Remus retorted, ignoring Ginny's feeble efforts to free herself. "You're only helping me because of Harry. If he hadn't been attacked then I'd have still been rotting in that cage."

"That's not true!"

Remus snorted. "If the others escaped that means Susan Bones did too. I saw the state she was in, so where's her antidote?"

"I only had enough ingredients for one dose."

"You're lying to a werewolf!"

"Fine!" Ginny snapped. "Harry is the only one I care about. Now let me go!"

Remus shook his head as Ginny redoubled her efforts to free herself. "You might have information in that stupid little head of yours that could be very useful."

"I don't know anything," Ginny said, gasping in pain. "And you're hurting me."

"Then stop struggling, because one way or another, you're coming with me."

Unable to shake free from Remus' iron grip, and frightened she might get caught in Remus' company, Ginny became businesslike again. "Then cast silencing and invisibility spells as we need to go."

After leaving the room, Remus stealthily made his way up the corridor, and everything went well until they reached Hufflepuff.

Pushing Ginny roughly against the wall, after removing the silencing spell, Remus quietly asked, "What's the password to get into Hufflepuff?"

"Why are you going in there?" Ginny asked in astonishment.

"I know of a way out," Remus responded. "So tell me the password."

"Losers," Ginny said softly.

Tightening his grip on Ginny's arm, Remus recast the silencing spell over them, pulled Ginny toward him and slung her over his shoulder. He had smelt three different scents up ahead and he didn't trust Ginny not to pull something. On arriving at Hufflepuff, Remus was relieved to see that the guards were standing at least twenty feet away from the entrance, and so Remus had no trouble making his way to the still life painting and whispering the password.

As he did, something clattered to the floor, and both he and the guards looked down in its direction, Remus recognizing it as a metallic hair clip that Ginny had been wearing.

Now on the alert, all three of the guards turned as the entrance opened, their wands flicking out and one of them called out, "Who's there?"

Ignoring the question, Remus dashed inside, and he hurriedly made his way to the corridor from which the boys' dormitories branched off, a struggling Ginny bouncing over his shoulder as he ran. As lights began to come on, he quickly dropped the silencing spell off himself

and placed the stolen wand against the plaque of the badger, whispering, "Loyalty above all else." After dashing in and swiveling back to the face the entrance in case he was too late, Remus let out a sigh of relief as the entryway closed behind him just as the one of the guards rushed in.

Now that he was safe, Remus removed the various spells that still remained on them before dumping Ginny unceremoniously on the floor and snarling at her, "You stupid bitch! You could have gotten us both killed!"

"I told you I didn't want to go."

Remus hauled Ginny up by the lapels of her blouse. "What do you think Voldemort would have done to you if those guards had succeeded in rescuing you? You not only killed Death Eaters, but you also made a potion that might save Harry and then you freed me. You'd have been joining those students you mentioned in that arena with me."

"If you'd simply let me go, he'd never have known anything."

"Well, tough," Remus said and he pointed ahead of him. "Move."

Ginny kept going until she reached a wall. "What now?"

"Step aside." Remus kept his wand on her as he opened the exit, only moving away to tap the badger that sat just inside the door. Glancing out, he noticed that the grounds were now alight and that guards were swarming everywhere. Remus decided to trust his instincts and wait. He therefore closed the door.

"We're not going?"

"It's too risky. We sit and wait," Remus said, and he pointed to the beanbags that Harry had left in the tunnel. "Use a beanbag and try to get some sleep."

"I, um, need the bathroom," Ginny said somewhat embarrassedly.

Determining she was telling the truth, Remus handed her a spare wand. "There's an alcove around the corner."

Her cheeks burning, Ginny headed for where Remus had said, the wand lighting the way. The moment she had finished, she decided to make a break for it. She didn't get any further than twenty feet up the tunnel before she was grabbed and slammed against the wall.

"It's only the respect and love I have for your parents that's stopping me from breaking your neck right now," Remus growled at her, his arm tightening against her throat. "Try and run again and I swear I'll kill you. If you understand, blink twice."

Ginny, who could barely breathe, did as Remus instructed, sucking in precious oxygen as he released her. "I hate you!"

"The feeling is entirely mutual, turncoat," Remus said, and he pointed towards the beanbags. "Now lie down and get some sleep."

As Ginny lay down she heard a soft spell and a chain attached itself to her wrist and the wall. "I really do hate you!"

"Shut up before I shut you up," Remus snapped, not in the mood for Ginny's tantrum. After patching up the wounds he had re-opened from his session with Snape earlier that day, Remus tiredly dragged a beanbag away from Ginny and settled down on it, relatively certain Ginny would find it difficult to get out of the shackle.

He was right. She was still there the next morning glaring at him. "Do you need the bathroom?"

"Yes," Ginny said, her voice patently unfriendly.

Remus unchained her. "Before I give you your wand, remember that I'm faster than you, more adept at dueling than you, and you won't get a second chance if you try and escape from me again."

Having thought about things as she'd lain on her makeshift bed, Ginny decided that she had let her fear of werewolves dictate her commonsense. "You wouldn't really kill me."

Remus guessed why Ginny had started to question his intent and so, using his stolen wand, he swore an oath. "I, Remus John Lupin, swear that I have killed on more than one occasion, including breaking someone's neck. Now do you believe me?"

Ginny's heart began to beat faster as the white light dissipated leaving Remus very much alive and very much a danger to her wellbeing. "How could they have let someone like you teach here?"

"You mean because I'm a killer or a werewolf?" Remus asked, aware that mentioning his furry problem would make Ginny even more uncomfortable than she was now.

"Both," Ginny said.

"I'm a very good liar," Remus told her, not about to reveal the truth of what he was. "Now, I suggest you use the bathroom, such as it is, and then return your wand to me. And don't forget, if you try anything, and I mean anything, I'll snap your neck like a twig." Although he knew he was being a little overdramatic, Remus could see that his words had had the desired effect after his sworn oath and Ginny paled before holding out her hand.

Remus handed over Ginny's wand and, not wanting to end up with a broken neck, Ginny quietly disappeared around the corner, did her business before returning and taciturnly handing over her wand.

The pair of them barely spoke for the next two days, except for Ginny grumbling she was hungry. With the full moon almost upon them, Remus was aware that he had to act now and so, as darkness began to fall, Remus made his way down to the Shrieking Shack from where, in the distance, he could see the arena Ginny had told him had been built. It stood not far from the quidditch pitch and had large gates and seating behind bars. Remus shivered as he realized what a close call he had had. He was about to immobilize the Whomping Willow when every instinct told him to avoid it, and so he changed his mind and headed towards the Forbidden Forest instead. Hagrid's hut was a burnt-out shell and Remus found himself wondering what had happened to the Groundskeeper.

When he arrived back at the tunnel he asked, "Do you know what happened to Hagrid?"

Ginny shook her head. "No idea."

"And do you know if there are wards anywhere near the Forbidden Forest?" Remus had decided to return to the tunnel to ask Ginny

rather than risking his life in trying to test them. "And don't forget, I'll know if you're lying."

Now more than a little afraid of Remus, Ginny answered truthfully. "Yes, there are."

Thinking about his options, Remus knew he had only one way out and he stunned Ginny, not about to have a re-run of the first night.

He didn't revive her until they reached the lake where Ginny looked around a little dazedly. "What are we doing here?"

"We're leaving," Remus said as he tested the water with one finger, it was icy cold.

Ginny also did the same. "You can't be serious. I'd freeze to death."

"The alternative is for me to snap your neck and leave you here for your precious master to find," Remus whispered in a quiet but deadly voice. "It's your choice, Miss Weasley."

Even though she was afraid, Ginny also suddenly felt really angry. "You know very well I don't have any choice."

"Then it looks as though you'll be coming with me." Remus then cast four spells on Ginny: an overpowered heating spell, a bubble charm, a silencing charm and a deadweight charm before doing the same on himself.

For once in his life Remus was thankful that he was a werewolf; his core body temperature was far higher than a normal human's. He wasn't entirely sure that Ginny would survive, but given her actions so far he was a great deal less concerned about her welfare than he would have been normally. The only reason he had let her live was because of what he had told her the first night: he respected and loved her parents and he wouldn't have wanted to be the one to tell them what he had had to do. He also knew that her mind might well hold memories that they might find useful.

Pointing at the water to indicate to Ginny to enter it beside him, Remus began to wade into the lake. The deeper they got the colder the water got; being March it was totally frigid, and Remus was gasping silently as the water began to steal away the heat from the

charm he had cast after a few seemingly short minutes, and although he continued to reapply it underwater, its effect was diminished and they both got colder and colder with every step they took.

With their underwater walk seeming to go on forever, Ginny collapsed about a third of the way across the lake. Remus sighed heavily and lifted her up, but even he was struggling against the cold by the time he reached an area where he could sense wards above him, although thankfully they didn't go all the way to the bottom of the lake. Shivering uncontrollably, he tried apparating.

Potter Place

Up late and trawling through another book, Sirius heard a massive crack in the hallway and went running in to discover his friend and Ginny Weasley lying in a puddle, Ginny wrapped in Remus' arms. "Merlin!"

Remus couldn't answer for chattering teeth and he was thoroughly relieved as Sirius cast a warming charm on him. But even that was not enough, and he was still shaking and unable to speak.

Sirius knelt down by Remus and began to run his wand over his friend. "You're suffering from severe hypothermia. We need to get you out of these clothes."

"W-W-Weasley f-f-first," Remus managed to get out. Although he loathed the girl, he could sense how close to death she was and he doubted she'd survive much longer without help.

Sirius ran his wand over the redheaded girl, who was barely breathing and vanished her soaking clothes, before apparating her upstairs and casting several spells on her. He then returned to Remus, who managed to get out the word, 'pocket'.

Aware it had to be important, Sirius began to check Remus' pockets, finding a vial in one and removing it. He then banished Remus' clothes, leaving Remus naked on the floor. "Get up."

Remus just wanted to curl up and die, but Sirius forced him to his feet. "Lift your arms above your head."

Remus tried to do as he was told but he wanted to close his eyes more and he collapsed. Sirius promptly apparated them both upstairs.

When he checked Remus over, Sirius was appalled at the damage that had been caused to his friend's body, suspecting that Remus was only alive because of his enhanced metabolism. Cursing his former captor, he began to heal Remus, although he could see from some of the scars that they would never vanish entirely.

When Remus woke up, he discovered Hermione lying sleeping next to him. Luna was on a chaise longue in front of the fire and she was also asleep.

Hermione came awake as Remus shifted and she gave a small cry, threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in Remus' chest, before starting to cry. "We all thought you'd died."

Luna also awoke upon hearing Hermione's cry. "You're awake!"

"How long have I been here?" Remus asked, as he held Hermione as she continued to weep, the stress of the last week catching up with her.

"Three days," Luna told him. "We had to move you into the basement for the full moon but even the wolf didn't wake up."

"Do you know why?" Remus asked in bewilderment at the news.

"You were healing," Luna told him. "Sirius said that you'd been hurt really badly and, after your escape, he guessed through the lake, he was surprised you were still alive."

"Sirius told you who he was?" Remus asked in surprise before indistinctly remembering arriving in the hallway and Sirius greeting him, something that shouldn't have happened. "When did he tell you?"

"The same day we were attacked," Luna said. "Macclesby fetched him as none of us knew what was wrong with Harry and Susan."

"I need the bathroom," Remus said reluctantly, although he really wanted to talk about Harry. "Let me go, Hermione, and we'll talk when I get back."

Remus was glad to find his legs were not too shaky as he got to his feet. When he returned, Luna had moved to sit on the bed and when Remus lay back down, she shuffled around so that he was now lying in between the two girls. "How is Harry?"

Now having her tears under control, it was Hermione who answered, "He's not doing well, although we're all hopeful his cufflinks will save him. Sirius said the potion you brought back isn't going to be of help. It would harm Harry rather than saving him."

Remus was hardly surprised to hear this and he therefore asked after Susan. "And Susan?"

Luna visibly drooped. "She's a lot worse than Harry. We tried a suspension potion but it failed. Sirius thinks..."

Hermione finished off the sentence that Luna couldn't. "He thinks she might not make it."

"Is she in a lot of pain?" Remus asked, remembering what he had heard when he had been locked up.

"We're keeping it controlled," Hermione said. "But we know that we won't be able to do so for much longer."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Remus said, before asking about their miraculous escape. "So how did you even manage to get out?"

"George and Ernie got us out," Luna said in a bright voice.

"If George got you out, I'm presuming he used his portkey, but how?"

Luna started, "After the wannabe took my magic..."

"Wannabe?"

"We don't think he's Voldemort," Hermione said. "Sirius said Voldemort might be a monster but he doesn't hide behind masks."

Remus had to admit she had an excellent point. "That's true, although I have to confess I thought it was him, especially when I heard Snape calling him 'my Lord'."

"Sirius said that Snape's a suck-up," Luna said, her dislike of Snape apparent. "And he also called him a few other things that I don't think Daddy would like me repeating."

At the mention of Xenophilius, Remus wondered if the children's families had been targeted as well. "Have you been in contact with your father?"

Luna nodded. "Yes, but when I told him what had happened he said to stay here and he'll be in touch."

"And has he been in touch?"

Luna smiled, Xenophilius having dropped by two nights earlier before leaving again. "Yes, and Daddy said that we shouldn't continue to use the floo network anymore unless it's an emergency as it might not be safe."

"I think that's a good idea," Remus said, before returning back to the subject of escape. "So what happened after you all left the hall?"

Luna shrugged. "I don't remember much about the journey to the dungeons and then I passed out when I got there."

Hermione therefore took over and explained everything that had gone on right up until Sirius arrived at Potter Place to help. "...and so Sirius dealt with treating Harry, and Nurse Gosford..."

"Nurse Gosford?" Remus asked in confusion.

"She was Sirius' girlfriend but she was going to give our story to her sister, who's Rita Skeeter, so he obliviated her and sent her back to the hospital," Luna told Remus.

"I knew he was having..." Remus stopped abruptly.

"Having sex with her," Luna supplied, guessing why Remus had not finished what he was saying. "It's okay. I'm old enough to know about these things."

"It still doesn't make it right for me to mention it," Remus said.

Hermione thought differently, especially when she thought about Susan and Harry. "I imagine we're going to be hearing about a lot worse than just sex, and having to deal with it."

"Don't give up hope," Remus said, putting his arm around Hermione and pulling her against him and kissing her on the forehead as she started to tear up again. "We have to believe Harry and Susan will get through this."

When Luna also started to cry, Remus used his other arm to place around her, before tugging her so that she, like Hermione, was lying with her head on his chest. Even with two weeping girls tucked up against him, Remus was still far from well, and, exhausted, he drifted off to sleep, although he hadn't meant to do so.

Giving a sniffle, when Hermione realized what had happened, she whispered to Luna, "We should move."

"No," Luna retorted in a stubborn voice, clinging more tightly to Remus. "I feel safe here."

So did Hermione and so she closed her eyes and, exhaustion taking over, she soon joined Remus in sleep, Luna copying her.

They were all woken by Sirius coming in to check on Remus. "Sorry, but I need to see how Remus is doing."

"I'm feeling much better. Is Ginny Weasley alive?" Remus asked.

Sirius nodded. "I take it you got the potion from her."

Remus could feel animosity wafting off Sirius. "Yes, and Hermione's already said it would harm Harry."

"Harm?" Sirius repeated, checking Remus over. "It would do more than that, the potion Weasley gave you was Neco Animus; it's more commonly known as the suicide potion."

"I knew I should I have trusted my instincts. I thought she was hiding something when she said it wasn't a poison and that it would help Harry," Remus said, well aware of the potion that some Unspeakables carried in case of capture, although he wasn't one of them. He sat up as Hermione and Luna both climbed off his bed. "But at the time I was more worried about getting out and then we didn't speak for two days."

"I wouldn't have spoken to her either," Sirius said. "Nor would I have brought her back here."

"She might have useful information and I had no idea that the potion was Neco Animus." Remus rubbed his hand over his face as he tried to shake off the last remnants of sleep. "What did Weasley say?"

"Nothing. I wanted to talk to you first before I questioned her."

"You've talked to me, now go ask her," Remus said, also more than a little angry at what Ginny had tried to do. "And do whatever you have to do to find out the truth."

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"I threatened to break her neck," Remus revealed. "Just don't go quite that far."

"I'll find out from her," Hermione snarled, angry at what Ginny had tried to do to her boyfriend, although so far Sirius had refused to let her go anywhere near the captive girl.

"I have a better idea," Sirius said, a grim look on his face. "I think it's time I introduced myself properly."

"Just remember, don't go too far," Remus warned, able to feel the animosity that was rolling off Sirius.

"And if she turns out to be a traitor?"

"Then she gets a fair trial," Remus said, leaving what the outcome of such a trial might be unsaid.

Although it was four a.m. Sirius marched into Ginny's room and shook the girl. "Wake up!"

Ginny groggily looked at Sirius, her eyes widening in fear. "You're..." Then commonsense kicked in. "What sort of trick is this? Sirius Black is dead."

"Do you know how a family ring works?" Sirius asked, deciding to cut to the chase.

Ginny, of course, did. "Yes, why?"

"Then watch." Sirius held up his right hand and slid off a plain gold ring that only became visible as he did. "Toujours Pur Sirius Orion Black."

Ginny watched in horrid fascination as the ring changed to display a shield emblazoned with a chevron, two star and sword, and flanking the shield on either side was a hound. "You're..."

"...your worst nightmare," Sirius snarled angrily.

"But you were executed," Ginny said, shrinking back against her pillows. "And Draco is head of the Black Family; he said so."

"Unlike you, Malfoy knows how to keep his mouth shut," Sirius said, his tone threatening. "You see, Weasley, I'm an executioner and although it served my Master well to have me show my face in public up until my supposed death, things have changed."

"But how did you get out?"

"I was rescued at the last moment by our Master," Sirius said, before he held his wand on her. "And he's asked me to find out why you gave Lupin a suicide potion to give to Potter."

Ginny quickly spat out what she knew Sirius wanted to hear. "I know from Blaise that our Master has been trying to find out from Lupin where Potter is hiding to make sure he is dead, and so I thought if I gave the potion to Lupin and went with him, I could find out where they were and the potion would kill Potter."

"That had better be the truth. If it isn't then I promise you're going to be more than a little sorry. In fact, you may still well be a little sorry."

Ginny shrank back, tears of fear starting to run down her cheeks. "What are you going to do me?"

"Perhaps I could take a leaf out of the Dark Lord's book and strip you of your magic," Sirius threatened. "You see, I'm not entirely sure I believe your story about trying to track Potter down. I think you betrayed our Master, Ginny."

Ginny pleaded, her hands outstretched. "Please, I'll do anything to prove I didn't."

"We'll see."

Sirius walked out and returned to Remus' room. "Well, she thinks I'm on that bastard's side and that I believe she betrayed him. She bleated about how she was going to try and find Harry to kill him by using you."

"I'm going to kill her!" Hermione barked out, only to stop when Luna grabbed her hand.

"No, Hermione. I think she gave Remus the potion to spare Harry," Luna said, unwillingly providing Ginny with an ally. "You said that death from the poison will be horribly painful and if you care about someone, it's the last thing you want to put them through. And despite everything that's gone on between Ginny and Harry, I think she still loves him and that's why she did it."

"I suppose we should consider that option, although until I feel up to questioning her properly with Veritaserum we can't know for sure. Until then she can remain locked up. What I can attest to, however, is that I know from listening to what happened to the Muggle-born students that death from the potion must be worse than painful," Remus said, his voice beginning to shake. "Those bastards left me in the next room to the students. They didn't even give them anything for the pain. For three days I could hear their moaning and their screaming, until eventually the last one went silent. Their bodies were..." Remus broke off, unable to describe what he had seen as the Muggle-borns' bodies had been removed. "I can't bear

for that to happen to Harry and Susan."

Sirius grasped Remus' hand. "We're doing everything we can for Harry and Susan. But I've got to be honest, Remus. It's not looking good. The suspension potion failed. And even though I'm keeping their pain levels to a minimum it's beginning to get to the point where I won't be able to prevent them from suffering." He took a deep breath. "Although I refused to give the suicide potion to Harry, given that we can't contact Amelia Bones, as Susan's fiancé, Neville wants to administer it to Susan before her pain gets much worse. The alternative is the Killing Curse and he doesn't want her to die like that."

"And what about Harry's pain when that gets bad?" Remus asked, well aware that the suicide potion took five days to brew.

"Harry is still holding in there, mostly we think because of the cufflinks that Susan gave him, but I'm quite certain she won't last much longer."

Remus shuddered. "The last day was terrible, Sirius. I've never heard screams like it, and if you say you can't do much more for the pain..."

The adults now faced a dilemma, but they all knew what Harry would want, Hermione putting it into words. "Harry would give the potion to Susan if it came down to the wire."

"I agree," Remus said. "But while they're both still alive, there's still hope."

April 26th 1997

Justin and Padma sat silently on Susan's left, Padma holding Susan's hand, Neville doing the same on the other side of the bed. In the bed, Susan was moaning continually, sweat coating her body, and it was obvious that she was in terrible pain, even though she was hooked up to a morphine drip that Cordelia had suggested to Sirius, and this was running in conjunction with magical treatments. Sirius therefore took the suicide potion out of his pocket. "She hasn't got much longer left before things start to get so painful I won't be

able to control it. If we're going to give her the potion, we should do it now before her suffering worsens."

Neville looked up, his face lined with strain. "The potion won't cause her anymore pain, will it?"

Sirius shook his head. "It will be over very quickly."

"I don't want to lose her," Neville said, his voice cracking. He sat with tears streaming down his cheeks, his face pale as he stared down at his fiancée. Susan gave an agonized scream, making everyone wince. With tears in his eyes, Neville held out his hand for the vial. "She's my fiancée. I should do this."

Sirius shook his head. "You wouldn't be able to live with the guilt. I'll do it."

After a few moments, Neville nodded and Sirius uncorked the vial, gently tipping the contents of it into Susan's mouth. She was still and quiet within a few minutes.

Sirius then ran his wand over her. "I'm so very sorry."

"I need some fresh air." Neville got to his feet and stumbled out. As he walked down the corridor, he passed Harry's room, only to grind to a halt as he heard a pain-filled cry, and he shook his head, tears in his eyes. "I can't do this. I can't do this."

Inside Harry's room, Remus glanced at the door. "I think someone is outside."

Cordelia rose to her feet and headed for the door. She spotted Neville entering his bedroom and hurried after him. "Neville?"

Neville turned around, his face pale. "I can't take it anymore, Cordelia. We just used the potion on Susan, which means that Harry will die in agony unless someone uses the Killing Curse on him."

Opening up her arms, Cordelia pulled Neville against her. "I'm so sorry, Neville."

Neville tugged free, and in almost a daze, he said, "I can't do it. I'm sorry. I have to go."

Concerned, Cordelia followed Neville around his bedroom. "Go where?"

"Away from here; away from the world that has hurt the people I love." Neville flicked his wand, and his clothing began flying haphazardly into his trunk.

"Neville, right now you're upset..." Cordelia began.

Neville turned, anger now filling his features. "Upset? Upset? Upset doesn't even come close to covering how I feel! I've always felt less than perfect growing up. I've wanted to be Harry all of my life – being the Boy Who Lived seemed oh so wonderful." Neville glanced towards the wall in the direction of Harry's room. "But until I really got to know him I never realized that his life wasn't the ideal world I'd imagined. Then I started going out with Susan, and everything seemed to fall into place. We had already made plans, talked about marriage and children and now none of that will happen for us. And it won't happen for Harry either. And I'm fucked if I'm going to stand by and watch him die in agony. I need some time alone."

"Neville, no," Cordelia said desperately. "I can help you through this."

"No, you can't," Neville said, his trunk now packed, and he closed the lid with another flick of his wand. "Susan has gone and Harry is going to die. It's now more than ever that I wish I could take his place."

Cordelia's eyes widened in alarm at the despondent tone, and she whispered softly, "Then you'd be the one to die."

"I know that," Neville responded. "But at least Harry would still be alive and he's more worthwhile than I've ever been."

Now very afraid, Cordelia made a grab for the distraught boy. But she was too late: Neville summoned his trunk and vanished the moment it touched his hand. Cordelia immediately turned and left Neville's room, hurrying back down the corridor to Harry's room. In tears she quickly told Remus about what had happened. "Remus,

Neville's ran off. They've given the suicide potion to Susan and I think he's feeling guilty about Harry. He said he wished he could take his place – that Harry's more worthwhile."

All those in the room except for Remus began to sob on hearing that Susan had passed on. Remus' focus, however, was solely on Cordelia as he got to his feet. "Cordie, did he say where he was going?"

"He just packed his trunk and left," Cordelia said. "He said he couldn't watch Harry slip away."

Luna looked up in shock, her face blotchy and red. "But it's not safe out there."

"It's not what's out there that I'm worried about," Cordelia admitted. "I'm afraid of what Neville might do to himself."

"He's hurting, Cordelia," Remus said softly in response. "But if he took his clothes with him, I really don't think he's going to do anything stupid."

Cordelia had not thought of that. "Can you find him?"

"I can try." Remus turned to Luna. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Sirius chose that moment to come into the room. "I've moved Susan into the dueling room upstairs until we can have a proper service for her. Where's Neville?"

Remus briefly told him what had transpired. "I'm going to try and find him. Stay with Harry."

Luna stopped him. "Neville has an emergency portkey for King's Cross Station."

Grabbing Cordelia's hand, Remus vanished. Unfortunately King's Cross Station was extremely busy and it was nigh on impossible to trace Neville with so many other scents. "We'll have to hope he's around somewhere."

"You don't think he is, do you?" Cordelia asked dully.

Remus shook his head. "No. I think he's left, but we should still check to make sure."

For almost two hours Remus and Cordelia searched but they found nothing.

Two Days Later

Harry, as Susan had, began to scream. Hermione sat holding his hand and sobbed openly, while Sirius did all that he could to try and help.

But it was in vain and unable to see Harry suffer in agony any more, Remus pulled out his wand, tears running down his cheeks as he said, "I'm sorry, Hermione, I can't put it off any longer. Let go of his hand." When Hermione was gently pulled away by Sirius, after refusing to let go of Harry, Remus aimed his wand but then he crumbled and began to sob unashamedly. "I can't kill him, Sirius, I just can't."

"I'll do it," Sirius said, having half expected this, although he too was in tears. As Hermione moved into the comfort of Remus' arms, Sirius aimed his wand at Harry. "Avada..."

Before Sirius could complete the spell, Harry suddenly ejected a black stream of vomit and stopped breathing. All at once a terrible screaming of a different type could be heard and it wasn't coming from Harry.

Remus immediately pulled Hermione further away from Harry and erected a shield. "Sirius, shield yourself now!"

The group watched as a familiar dark treacle-like mass oozed from Harry's forehead before it began to slither over his body, down the bed and towards where the group was standing. Remus could feel his shield being drained. "Switch to a deflecting shield." The shrieking began again as the change of shield prevented the Horcrux from sucking energy from it. A few minutes later, it exploded. Only then did Remus lower his shield.

Shaken up, Hermione moved back over to Harry and stared in horror at the black vomit on his chest. Aware of Sirius' dislike of

vomit, she was about to vanish it, when Sirius uncharacteristically yelled out 'no, wait'.

Shocked, Hermione stayed her actions and watched as a pale Sirius ran his wand over it wanting to confirm what he suspected.

"It's the poison. You can get rid of it now."

Remus then vanished the vomit as Sirius began to work on Harry. "Come on, come on."

Hermione watched nervously. "What are you doing?"

"Not now," Sirius barked as he cast the Revivio spell again and again just as Remus had done when Sirius had attacked Harry at Hogwarts. "Revivio! Revivio! Revivio! Revivio!"

Everyone was relieved when Harry suddenly sucked in air on Sirius' fourth attempt, before beginning to choke.

Remus snaked an arm out as Hermione's legs buckled and she dazedly asked, "What happened?"

Sirius immediately cast a spell to clear Harry's airways before erecting a bubblehead charm to help him breathe. "I think we got lucky and he might make it."

"How?" Remus asked.

"I think the cufflinks finally expunged the poison but it was too much for Harry's body," Sirius said as he sank onto a chair, his legs shaking. "He went into cardiac arrest and the Horcrux left him looking for another victim."

Hermione turned to Remus and started to sob with pure relief. Not hiding his own tears of relief, Remus gently stroked her hair. "Will he be okay?"

"I hope so," Sirius said, his voice strained. "But I don't know yet how much damage the poison or the lack of oxygen has done."

Five hours went by until suddenly, with a loud groan, Harry opened his eyes. "Amicus?"

Remus, Sirius and Hermione rushed over to him. "Harry, we're here."

"Huh?" Harry asked.

Hermione flashed Sirius a worried look. "You're safe now."

Harry looked at Hermione with a distracted air. "What?"

Sirius waved his wand over Harry. "He seems physically well, but there is still a trace of poison in his system."

"Why doesn't he seem to know what's happening?" Hermione asked shakily, scared at what Sirius might say.

Sirius sighed heavily as he responded, "His disorientation could be a side-effect of the problem I warned you about."

"Then why did he ask for me?" Remus barked at his friend, not wanting to believe that Harry could be mentally impaired.

Sirius glanced down at Harry, who was staring at him. "I believe he has retained some memories and maybe your alter ego is one of them." He took Harry's hand. "Amicus is going to take good care of you."

Harry gave a satisfied smile and slipped back into sleep. Remus took a little comfort from Harry's smile. "He seemed to understand that, so why didn't you just say my name?"

"Because he's already connected you to your Unspeakable's name and it just seemed easier," Sirius said. "Now I'm going to give him an emetic, as this time I think it will work as the poison is no longer in his tissue but it might be some time before it does."

Harry opened one eye to discover that Remus was sitting at his bedside. "Hurts."

Remus immediately jumped up. "Harry?"

Harry's response was to vomit yet another black mass, coating the white sheet and blankets. Remus hauled him up before vanishing the mess and reaching out to get a glass of water. "Drink this."

Harry took a sip. "My mouth tastes horrid and my throat is killing me."

Remus duly cast a breath freshening charm. "I'll get Sirius."

"He's here?" Harry asked tiredly.

Remus nodded. "I'll be right back."

Harry was sleeping when Remus returned with Sirius, not having told anyone else yet what had happened. "What do you think?"

"If he knows who we are and is able to talk coherently then I'd say he's out of the woods," Sirius said, waving his wand over Harry. "And that's the last of the poison."

Both men turned around at a knock at the door. Hermione, who was sleeping on the sofa, didn't stir. Remus opened the door to find Padma standing there. "Hello."

Padma tried to look around Remus. "Is Harry okay now?"

"Yes, you can come in," Remus stood aside and let the girl in. He kept the door open as George, Ernie, Luna, Ron, Parvati and Cordelia all filed in as well.

When Harry awoke for the third time, he discovered that he had a full room and he looked at his friends in surprise. "What are you doing here?" It was then that he realized he was in his bed at Potter Place. "And why aren't I at school?"

"What's the last thing you remember?" Hermione asked as she sat down next to him, taking his hand.

Harry's brow wrinkled as he thought back. "Talking to Justin about the chocolates and how you wouldn't want me to eat them."

"So you don't remember collapsing or coming around earlier today?" Luna asked, as she leant back against Cordelia as she slipped her arms around her to comfort her.

Harry slowly shook his head. "No." He gave a huge dramatic sigh. "Don't tell me. I ate a bad piece of chocolate, didn't I?"

Remus sat on the edge of the bed, on Harry's other side. "It was a lot more serious than just a bad piece of chocolate and it wasn't only you who was affected. All of the Muggle-borns were as well. I'm so sorry, Harry, but I'm afraid they're all dead."

Harry suddenly noticed an important omission in those gathered around him. "Justin?"

Remus rushed to quell Harry's panic. "He's fine, Harry. He's just sleeping – he spent last night sitting in with you."

"But he ate the chocolates," Harry told them worriedly.

"Justin told us," Sirius said, and then let Harry in on what they had done in response. "And we therefore believe he's a half-blood."

"So Justin's father isn't a Muggle?" Harry asked in shock, as he knew that Cordelia was definitely a Muggle.

"No, I think his real father was a wizard," Cordelia told Harry, revealing what she had finally told her son. "Edmund wasn't his father. I only married Edmund because I was pregnant and he offered to adopt Justin."

Harry relaxed, now feeling happier that he knew his friend was safe. "So everybody's safe then?"

Luna, who was emotionally exhausted, let out a tiny sob and turned to face Cordelia, who held her against her breast.

Hermione too had tears in her eyes as she told Harry what had happened. "Susan died, Harry. Even though she's a half-blood, somehow she was also poisoned."

Harry closed his eyes for a second, and then he reopened them, tears spilling out as he did so and he noticed who else he had missed. "So where's Neville?"

Remus sighed. "He couldn't deal with having to watch you die as well, so he fled. I eventually managed to track him down to Heathrow Airport. He somehow managed to board a plane to New York and after that the trail went cold."

"How does he even know about Muggle planes?" Harry asked.

"Luna told him about them after I told her what Muggles could do and how she could cope without her magic," George said.

Harry glanced at the girl in Cordelia's arms. "Cope without her magic?"

"Someone we believe to be masquerading as Voldemort stole her magic, although we can't confirm that as there was no sign of him on the Marauders Map, which is frozen by the way," Remus said.

"And he did it because I didn't do as he told me to when he first attacked Hogwarts," Hermione said, her voice full of guilt.

Luna moved from Cordelia to hug Hermione. "It isn't your fault. You were trying to help me."

Harry was struggling to understand what had happened. "So what exactly happened?"

"I was due at Hogwarts, and by using the Map and your cloak, I managed to free everyone with Ernie's help..."

Harry broke in. "Ernie?"

Ernie smiled at Harry. "You only just realized I was here?"

"I don't think I'm quite with it yet," Harry said truthfully. "So you and George helped everyone escape, but how?"

"Let me explain from the beginning," George said in a firm voice before he relayed everything that had gone on.

When Harry discovered that Remus had been captured, he asked, "Did Snape hurt you?"

"A little," Remus said, downplaying how awful his torture at Severus' hands had actually been.

Harry was far from stupid. "He went to town on you, didn't he?"

Sirius told Harry the truth. "He used silver nitrate on Remus – the scars on his chest won't ever vanish."

"Sirius!"

"He deserves to know the truth," Sirius said, ignoring Remus' protest. "We're at war now and he's going to hear and see much worse things than what I've just told him."

"At war?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Our copycat has taken the Ministry."

Harry was more than a little shocked. "So the Ministry is gone?"

"Not exactly gone, but no-one can get in," Sirius told him.

"What about FDD?" Harry reminded Remus about Destin Simon and his offer. "Did you send Destin Simon the ribbon?"

"There was nowhere to send it to," Remus told him. "We think our pseudo-Voldemort also destroyed French Auror Division and he attacked USAD as well. And to top it off, he's also taken Azkaban. When I'd recovered, I tried to use my emergency portkey to reach the Alpha and Beta sites but it wouldn't work."

"So both sites have gone too?" Harry was beyond horrified. "He's taken everything over." He tried to get up. "He might not be Voldemort but we have to stop him somehow."

Hermione pushed him back against the pillows. "Harry, you barely survived the poisoning yourself. In fact you died."

This news came as the biggest shock to Harry. "I died?"

"Yes," Sirius said, and then he passed on the only good bit of news they had. "But in doing so, your Horcrux left your body to seek out a new host. When it couldn't find one, it exploded, so you no longer have a Horcrux inside of you, Harry."

It was all a little too much for Harry and he broke down. Remus shepherded everyone, leaving Hermione alone to comfort Harry.

Next Chapter: Ginny gets a trial; Harry pledges to free those in Hogwarts; Narcissa becomes an unwilling ally.

Chapter 56: Coward

April 29th 1997

Ginny looked up from the book she was reading and called out, "Come in." She dropped her book in shock at the sight of Harry entering the room. "Harry!"

"Hello," Harry said, but his tone was far from warm. "As you can see I survived, no thanks to you."

"I..." Ginny trailed off at the sight of Remus and Sirius coming into the room together. "What's going on?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you but I'm not exactly what I seem."

"But your Family ring..."

"Oh, I'm Sirius Black but I'm not on your side. You see it was Harry and Remus who rescued me and not your Master."

Ginny's face turned ugly. "You tricked me!"

"Guilty on all counts, something you'd better hope you're not."

"What do you mean?"

Remus pulled out his Unspeakable's badge and tapped it with his wand. "You should recognize what this is."

"You're an Unspeakable!"

"As are they."

Harry and Sirius both presented their own IDs and Remus continued speaking. "As a triumvirate together we are authorized to conduct a trial..."

"Trial for what?"

"I'll set out the formal charges in a moment," Remus said as he transfigured various items into a table and chairs. "Sit down."

Her legs shaking, Ginny did as she was told.

Remus sat down on the other side of the table, Sirius and Harry flanking him. "I am obliged to tell you that I am Unspeakable Amicus and under Rule 456.32b of the Emergency Rules of War, together with Unspeakables Risus and Noir, as a triumvirate we are authorized to conduct these proceedings. Ginevra Molly Weasley, you are charged with the attempted murder of Harry James Potter and of being an accessory in the murders of Susan Amelia Bones and the Muggle-born students of Hogwarts, a list of whose names I have here. How do you plead?"

Ginny's eyes widened. "You're going to kill me?"

"What the sentence is depends upon your answers," Remus told her. "Now I would like your plea."

Terrified, Ginny immediately said, "Not guilty, of course."

"I wish to administer Veritaserum – are you amicable to this?"

"And if I'm not?"

"Then I will enter a summary judgment and form an opinion based upon the evidence I already hold," Remus said, fully expecting Ginny to agree to the Veritaserum.

"I don't have much choice."

Remus nodded at Sirius, who got up and administered Veritaserum. "First of all we will deal with the accessory charge. On 7th April 1997 were you aware that the Muggle-borns were going to be poisoned via chocolates laid out on the house tables?"

"Yes and no," Ginny answered.

"So you were aware that the Muggle-borns were going to be poisoned?" Remus asked, trying to figure out Ginny's confusing answer.

"Yes."

"But not that the chocolates had been doctored?"

"No."

Although he already knew the answer, Remus wanted Ginny to confirm what she had told him when she had been effecting his rescue. "Did Severus Snape make the poison?"

"Yes."

Given that she knew this, contrary to Ginny's plea during the rescue that there had been nothing she could have done, Remus wondered if there had been. "Did you ever have the opportunity to sabotage the poison given that you knew of its existence?"

Ginny struggled hard against the Veritaserum before bursting into tears and saying, "Yes."

"How many times?" Harry blurted out in disbelief.

Ginny thought for a moment before saying, "Twice."

"Then why didn't you?" Harry asked in a voice filled with disdain.

"Because I was too scared."

His mind made up as to the charge of accessory, Remus moved on. "Why did you try and poison Harry?"

"I didn't," Ginny said in a pitiful voice. "I just didn't want him to die in agony. The Dark Lord left a first year Muggle-born in a cage in the Great Hall to die. It was the worst thing I've ever seen or heard. It was meant as a lesson as to what would happen to anyone who defied him."

"So why didn't you give the same release of death to the other Muggle-borns?"

"I couldn't have gotten into the room – it was always guarded up until a few days before I rescued you."

"Was your only reason for rescuing me to save Harry?"

"No," Ginny said. "I wanted to save the other students from being killed by you."

Remus could feel Ginny's enmity and he suspected it was directed at him and what he was. "You don't like me, do you?"

"No."

"Is that why you tried to sabotage my escape after going to so much trouble to try and help Harry or was it because you were frightened?"

"Neither. I was hoping you'd drop me and run."

This led Remus to the other subject he had wanted to bring up. "If you didn't want to leave that must mean you're a Death Eater. Is that correct?"

"No."

Remus knew Ginny was holding something back. "Were you going to become a Death Eater?"

Ginny's 'yes' was almost silent and Harry had strain to hear her.

Remus, however, did not. "When?"

"The night of the full moon."

"Did you want to become a Death Eater?"

"I..." Ginny faltered before the Veritaserum forced her to answer. "I did but I just wanted to be somebody."

"I'll take that as a yes," Remus said, noting it down. "Do you know that to become a Death Eater you have to kill someone to prove your worth?"

Ginny knew that her next answer would almost definitely condemn her but she had little option except to answer, "Yes."

"And you were ready and willing to do this?"

"Yes," Ginny said, now very afraid and she started to sob.

"Do you know that it would likely have been a Muggle?" Sirius interjected.

Ginny nodded. "Yes, Blaise said it wouldn't be a wizard."

"And does that make it right?" Harry snarled, suddenly feeling very angry.

"No."

Remus placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, before continuing. "Is Blaise a Death Eater?"

"Yes, he is."

"And Draco Malfoy?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who is behind the gold mask?" Sirius asked, needing to know.

"The Dark Lord," Ginny said, although her tearstained face spoke of her confusion at being asked the question.

Remus was not surprised she thought that; he himself had believed the same. "Do you know what he has planned?"

"To take over the wizarding world."

"Anything specific?"

"No."

Having exhausted his major questions, Remus erected a privacy bubble to speak to Sirius and Harry. "I'm not going to bother asking about her killing the Death Eater as I'd have done the same myself, and given her reasons, I can't find her guilty of trying to kill Harry, not in all good conscience anyway. Do you both agree?"

Harry and Sirius both nodded, before Harry asked, "What about the charge against her for not helping the Muggle-borns?"

"She knew about the poison, Harry, and she had two opportunities to do something about it," Remus said softly. "She could have stopped this, so she's an accessory, although I can understand why she might have been afraid. However, it's not this that has swayed me toward finding her guilty; it was her confession that she wished to become a Death Eater, her intention to freely commit murder, and that she hoped I'd drop her during my escape rather than trying to free herself because she was afraid."

Sirius knew what this meant. "So what happens now?"

Remus sighed. "I hate to say it but if she had been anybody else I'd be throwing the book at her."

"You mean giving her a death sentence?" Harry asked. "Don't you think that's a little harsh?"

Remus shook his head. "We're at war, Harry, and the rules governing my actions are harsher than they might usually be. However, when I think about what it would do to her parents and her family, I'm going to use my discretion and recommend staying the death sentence and choose imprisonment instead. Do you both agree?"

Harry sighed as heavily as Remus had a moment ago. "As much as I hate her, I don't know how I could ever tell Aunt Molly that I'd agreed to a death sentence and I'm not sure I could live with that sort of thing on my conscience, at least as far as she's concerned, so yes, I agree."

Sirius thought differently. "I disagree. Not only did she want to become a Death Eater, but she nearly got you killed to try to save her own skin, she tried to kill Harry and she let those students die when she could have sabotaged the potion. She deserves to be thrown in a cage with you at the full moon for what she's done, but since that isn't going to happen then I'm of the opinion that she should be executed by whatever humane method you choose."

"Does the decision have to be unanimous?" Harry asked as Remus made notes of what Sirius had asked for.

Remus confirmed that it did. "Because this is not an official court session and is taking place under emergency war conditions, yes it does. Sirius, will you reconsider your recommendation?"

Knowing Remus as well as he did, he doubted his friend, or for that matter, Harry, would back down, and so Sirius therefore came up with alternative but not before making his feelings clear. "I truly believe she deserves to die for what she's done but given that you two feel strongly about commuting such a sentence, I am willing to consider imprisonment if you also take a leaf out of our pretender's book."

"You mean by taking her magic?" Harry asked, having been told about Sirius and Ginny's previous conversation.

"Yes." Sirius then went on to clarify his reasoning. "Susan and the other Muggle-borns are dead and are never going to be able to use their magic again, so if she's not going to pay the price with her life, Weasley certainly deserves to pay for it with her magic. And, unlike what that gold masked bastard did to Luna, I want Weasley's punishment made permanent," Sirius said firmly. "As far as I'm concerned, she's as guilty as Snape and our pretender for not helping."

Harry interrupted. "Luna's loss of magic isn't permanent?"

"She's not a natural squib, Harry, and, as such, she still has a viable magical core, although in her case it's artificially void. If she could perform magic, then Luna could, only theoretically, of course, top up her magical core," Sirius explained. "And I say theoretically since because she can't cast a spell in the first place, it would be impossible."

Remus was about to confirm Sirius' explanation when he suddenly remembered something. "Actually, while you're right that Luna can't do anything, what about us? When I was helping you to study for your pre-med, wasn't there a spell for medical transference of power?"

"How do you recall this stuff?" Sirius asked in exasperation, before admitting that he couldn't remember. "I don't know off the top of my head. I'd have to look it up."

Harry suddenly felt excited. "So you mean there's a chance Luna could get her power back?"

"If we discover I'm right about the spell..."

"I'm going to look now," Sirius said and he vanished.

Harry then took Remus to task. "Why didn't you mention this before?"

"Because it was just a bit of knowledge from my past that I'd buried and it's only when Sirius was talking that I recalled it." Remus gave Harry a stern look. "You can't honestly think I'd have let Luna suffer all this time if I'd recalled it sooner, do you?"

"No," Harry hurriedly said. "But I know how good your memory is."

"It is good but it's not infallible," Remus said. "And I think we should go join Sirius and help him to look." He then dropped the privacy bubble. "Miss Weasley, we've decided to adjourn this trial while we consider our options. We'll be back when we've come to a conclusion."

He and Harry then disappeared, leaving a frightened and unhappy Ginny behind.

Sirius was in the study, having dropped into St. Bart's and grabbed the medical texts he thought he might need, and without any hesitation he began to bark out orders. "Harry, take that book there, and Remus, you can look through that one."

After a few hours, Remus found the spell he'd vaguely remembered. "I've got it, although I'm not sure Luna will want to take the risk. It says here if the donor doesn't keep still during the transference, it could kill the donee."

"Then we stun Weasley and take her magic," Sirius said.

"You didn't let me finish," Remus said, before doing so. "Magic cannot be used to hold a subject in place; it would interfere with the transference."

"How about tying her down?" Harry asked, coming up with a non-magical solution. "Then she wouldn't be able to move."

"First we need to discuss it with Luna," Remus said. "But before we do, are we all agreed that the sentence for Ginevra Weasley is the permanent stripping of her magic and imprisonment?"

"For how long?" Harry asked, suddenly realizing that Remus hadn't stipulated any length of time. "And where?"

"Twenty years," Sirius said, dealing with Harry's first question. "They were going to lock me up for life for what they thought I'd done to your family, so I think twenty years isn't too much to ask for being an accessory to multiple murders and the actual intention to kill someone."

"Thirty-five," Harry countered, thinking about how the court had dealt with his case against Dumbledore. "One year for every Muggle-born who died, one for Susan, and one for the Muggle whose life Ginny would have taken."

"I concur," Remus said. "Sirius?"

"You'll get no argument from me."

Remus noted down the agreed punishment. "You do realize that Luna might not even go for the idea about the magic. You know how compassionate she is, even about someone like Weasley."

"Then we ask her," Harry declared. "And I think we should do it now."

Remus agreed. "Let's bring her in and talk with her."

Harry vanished and reappeared within seconds.

Luna could see that something serious had happened, Harry's stern 'we need to talk to you' being the first hint. "Did you find her guilty?"

"Yes, but not of cold-blooded murder," Remus said, before explaining more fully. "Miss Weasley could have sabotaged the poison on two occasions and failed to do so. She also admitted that she was prepared to commit murder to become a Death Eater."

Luna offered up an explanation. "Perhaps she was afraid."

"What would you have done if you'd had a chance to sabotage the potion?" Remus asked, well aware that Luna didn't really have it in her to kill so he didn't even bother asking about the final part of his statement.

"I don't know but I would have tried to help the students," Luna said, before hesitantly saying, "At least I think I would."

"You did try, even though it was too late," Harry reminded her. "But Ginny could have made a difference earlier on but failed to do so."

Luna had to agree but she was also confused as to why she had been summoned. "So Ginny is guilty of not helping but why am I here?"

"Because of the sentence we're imposing on her," Remus said, taking Luna's hand as he could feel how nervous she was. "We're going to imprison her but not before stripping her of her magic, magic we propose trying to pass on to you."

Luna put her free hand to her mouth in shock. "You can give me my magic back?"

"If you think you can live with knowing from where it came," Remus said, aware of how much this was affecting Luna.

"I, um, need to talk to George," Luna said, trying to figure things out.

"Why don't we fetch George in?" Sirius suggested, well aware of how close Luna and George had grown and how much Luna was now relying upon him. "I'll get him."

On entering the room, George surmised correctly that things hadn't gone well for his sister by the severe looks on Remus' and Harry's faces. "She's guilty, isn't she?"

Luna burst into tears. "Oh, George."

George knew that Luna didn't like Ginny and he immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion, his face paling. "You're going to execute her?"

"No," Remus said. "Although I have to be honest and say that she deserves it. She could have prevented all of this and she didn't."

"Prevent it, how?"

"She could have sabotaged the potion, and on more than one occasion," Sirius said. "And she also admitted to wanting to become a Death Eater and of her intention to take a Muggle life to do so."

George was horrified but still confused. "Okay, so why is Luna so upset?"

"Because before we imprison your sister for her intention to become a Death Eater and for being an accessory to murder, I'm going to strip her of her magic, magic that we believe I might be able to transfer to Luna."

Now George understood. "And Luna is having a hard time deciding if to do it or not." Glancing down at the weeping girl in his arms, he nodded towards the door. "Can you give us some time alone?"

"Of course," Remus said. "We'll be in the dining room."

Once the door had closed, George set Luna away from him. "If this wasn't Ginny we were talking about, would you take your magic back?"

Luna shuddered and nodded. "Yes, but even though you know I don't like her very much, she's still your sister, George."

"And you think I won't like you anymore if you take Ginny's magic, don't you?"

Wiping her face, Luna nodded miserably. "I really want to be magical again if I can but I don't want you to hate me."

"Luna, Ginny could have saved, or at least attempted to save those students and she didn't," George said, his voice full of dismay. "And although I don't want her to suffer what you went through because

she is my sister, I just have to remember how much pain Susan went through to make me think differently."

"And you wouldn't hate me?"

"Luna, I've seen Hermione's memory of what happened and I watched as you risked your own life to try and give those students a fighting chance, a chance my own sister should have given them... How could I hate you?"

Luna's tears started up again and she was held against George as she cried.

Remus and the others were called back a short time later. "What have you decided?"

His arms around Luna's waist, George told them, "We've talked and decided that rather than waste Ginny's magic, if there is something that can be done, then Luna should have the magic. However, Luna wants Ron and Charlie to be asked for their opinion first, even though Ron's made it perfectly clear about his feelings for Ginny."

Ron was therefore duly summoned and told what they had discovered. "She let them die?"

Remus shook his head. "Not exactly but she might have been able to prevent their deaths."

"And you say she was going to become a Death Eater and kill someone to do so?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Then I don't have a sister," Ron said in disgust. "She's nothing but a coward and I'd drain her dry and give her back to her precious bloody Master." He then turned and stomped off.

George could feel Luna shaking in his arms and he clarified what he thought was the position. "I think we can safely say that Ron is agreeable to the decision."

Charlie was the next person on the list to be contacted and, after Sirius had reverted to his Simon persona to save time and difficult

explanations, Charlie was told where to portkey into. Once there, Charlie hugged Harry, Luna and George, Ron having left the house with Parvati, refusing to return until Ginny had gone. Charlie was then told what had happened.

"Merlin! I thought she was a prisoner in Hogwarts, not part of this."

"I'm afraid she's confessed under Veritaserum," Remus said. "There can be no doubt at all."

Charlie shook his head in disbelief. "I wish I'd known. Maybe I could have done something to help."

"I think Gin has always wanted more than Mum and Dad ever gave her," George said, finally beginning to accept that his sister wasn't the girl he had thought her to be. "This was her way of trying to get it."

Charlie suspected George was right but it was Ginny's sentence he was more concerned about. "Is your decision to take her magic final?"

Remus nodded. "I'm sorry, Charlie, but given we're conducting this as a war court, I can't do anything else under the circumstances. If it had been anybody else I would have ordered an outright execution."

"Then I think if she is to be stripped of her magic, it should be given to Luna," Charlie said, his voice shaking. "At least one good thing would come of this that way. And then, rather than imprisoning her, I'd like to take her with me back to the Reserve. It's not as if you can lock her up in Azkaban and I'm sure you don't want her under your feet."

"Is there somewhere at the Reserve she can be locked up?"

Charlie shook his head. "No, but without magic she couldn't leave, not without breaking her neck trying to scale down the mountainside anyway. And I can arrange it so that she can't get access to our messenger owls."

Harry came up with something that might be of benefit to the Reserve in return for putting up with Ginny; he also rather liked the

idea of putting distance between himself and Ginny. "You could always put her to work. She'd be too tired to move."

George shivered at the remembrance of how tough it had been at the Reserve. "I think Harry's right. And maybe she might become a nicer person if she was to be forced to undergo a little hard labor."

Remus mulled this over before saying to Charlie, "If I agree to this and she escapes, then you would be held responsible."

"I understand," Charlie said immediately. "But she's still my sister at the end of the day, and I know my parents would prefer for this to happen than for her to be stuck in a dungeon in a house where nobody wants her around."

Sirius brought up a good point. "The sentence is for thirty-five years. Do you really want her around for that long? Because you'd be responsible for her until the end of her sentence, if you agree."

"Is there no chance of cutting it short for good behavior?"

Remus considered the request. "If I say yes, then it would be no sooner than ten years from today. And if you agree to fundamentally become her jailor, you'll be liable for her for at least that time."

Charlie accepted this. "I don't intend to reside anywhere else but at the Reserve until I'm no longer fit enough to work with dragons and so that won't be a problem. It's not as if she won't have her own tent or hut to sleep in and she'll be performing a useful job this way, although I will have to check with Tula first as she's in charge."

Remus turned to Harry. "Do you concur?"

"I do."

When asked the same question, Sirius agreed, as glad as Harry to put some distance between himself and the youngest Weasley. "I do."

"Then it's agreed," Remus said, pulling out his notes and recording the final decision. "Ginny will be remanded to your custody once her magic has been taken."

Charlie then brought up something no-one had expected. "I may as well tell you now that I need to ask Tula about this as more than my boss. I asked her to marry me last night and she said yes."

George grinned with pleasure after the dismal morning and he lightened up the atmosphere by joking with his older brother. "You mean you begged and she said yes."

Charlie gave a belly laugh. "Exactly."

Everyone offered their congratulations before Remus brought the mood back down to earth. "I hate to be the one to break this up, but I need to finalize the proceedings."

Charlie nodded. "I know. I'll go speak to Tula and then if she says yes, I'll be waiting to take Ginny back with me as soon as it's been done."

"Then we'd better finish this," Remus said.

Ginny was a bag of nerves as Sirius, Remus and Harry re-entered her room. "What have you decided?"

"That while you are guilty of being an accessory to murder and of intending to commit murder, you are not guilty of Harry's attempted murder," Remus said, not beating about the bush.

"Are you going to... to..." Ginny started to cry, unable to get her words out for fear.

"That depends upon you," Remus said and he leant against the table. "We're going to strip you of your magic."

"No!" Ginny screamed, finding her voice.

"The alternative is execution," Remus said harshly, not having any sympathy at all for Ginny or her predicament. "It's your choice."

"I don't want to die."

"Then your magic will be stripped," Remus decreed. "However, rather than simply drain it into the ether, we are going to transfer it to Luna Lovegood."

"She can't have it!" Ginny began to get hysterical. "She can't! I won't let you!"

Sirius stunned her. "Let me force-feed her a calming potion."

When Ginny came around she felt much calmer. "What did you do to me?"

"Sirius gave you a small dose of calming potion," Remus said before laying things on the line. "Now that you're calmer, I want to set out your alternatives: one, I execute you outright, or two, I strip you of your magic and give it to Luna, during which time you will keep stock still no matter how painful the procedure is..."

"What happens if I move?"

"You could kill Luna and if that were to happen, I would summarily execute you."

Ginny now couldn't cry thanks to the potion in her bloodstream, although she wanted to, and she was horribly afraid but she also had little choice. She therefore said truthfully, "I'm not sure if I would be able to keep still."

"Then we'll need to secure you manually rather than using a spell to hold you in place," Remus said, deciding to implement Harry's idea.

Ginny gasped as ropes flew out of Remus' wand, securing her to the chair on which she was sitting, her head forced backwards so that she was unable to struggle in any way. Panic tried to set in. "Please don't do this."

"We have to. You know what the alternative is," Remus said and he turned to Sirius. "While I fetch Luna, you need to obliviate Miss Weasley of any knowledge of who you really are and that we rescued you."

Luna was brought into the room, noticing a screen that was blocking off part of the room and, she suspected, Ginny, something of which she was rather glad.

Sirius gently steered her into a chair that was close to the door before giving her final instructions. "You have to keep still during the spell. It won't hurt but it will be uncomfortable and it still might not work."

"Okay," Luna said, her voice shaking.

On the other side of the screen, Remus placed a blue, rather than a black, cloth on his shoulder before reading out the sentence. "Ginevra Molly Weasley, you have been found guilty of being an accessory to murder, of admitting your intention to becoming part of an illegal organization, and of being prepared to commit murder to become part of such organization, the sentence for which is the transference of your magic to Luna Lovegood. After such sentence has been carried out, you will essentially be placed on parole for thirty-five years and will be remanded to the permanent custody of Charles Weasley. Should you make any attempt to escape while in his custody, then your parole will be revoked and you will be sentenced to death. Do you have anything to say before the sentence is carried out?"

Unable to shake her head, Ginny simply closed her eyes as her throat seemed to close up with fear.

"We're ready," Sirius said.

At Sirius' confirmation that he was prepared to monitor Luna, Remus took his place and aimed his wand at Ginny. "Executio Magus Abalienato Luna Lovegood Infinitas."

Ginny gasped in pain as her magic was forcibly ripped away. Although it wasn't painful, Luna similarly gasped as she felt as though she was being pushed outward from the inside.

As the link glowed red, Remus ended the spell. "It's done." He then walked away from Ginny, who had closed her eyes.

"I can do magic?" Luna asked in patent disbelief as Remus came around the screen.

"Not yet," Sirius said gently. "You still need to give your body time to recover, so no attempting anything for at least a week."

"So I can go now?"

Remus nodded. "Your part in this is over."

Wanting to put distance between herself and Ginny, Luna got to her feet. "Feel strange." She then keeled over.

When Luna came to, it was daylight and Justin was sitting beside her. "Justin?"

"Thank Merlin!" Justin exclaimed. "We were starting to think you'd never come round."

"How long have I been out?"

"Five days."

"Did it work?"

"We don't know yet... you've been leaking magic," Justin said, helping Luna to sit up, "and you almost died. Sirius thinks your body tried to reject the magic and he spent two days in with you, trying to keep you alive. We all offered our magic if it would help but Sirius said it would probably make things worse."

Luna was grateful but she looked around the room for the one person she had expected to be there. "Where's George?"

"Out," Justin said, although he didn't look at Luna as he did.

"Tired." Luna shut her eyes and fell asleep.

When she finally did come around properly, Luna was rather dismayed to discover that once again it was Justin who was sitting beside her, and, a short time later, it was Justin who offered his support when Sirius held out his wand to test her.

"Are you ready?"

Luna clenched Justin's hand tightly. "Yes."

Sirius ran his wand over Luna several times before smiling widely. "I think it's worked, Luna, although I can't run a test to determine how

powerful you are now." He handed over his wand. "Try a simple spell."

Luna shakily held up the wand and in a scared voice, she said, "Lumos." She then burst into tears as the wand lit up.

After passing Sirius his wand back, Justin sat on the edge of the bed and pulled Luna against him. "Shh, it's going to be okay."

Deciding he was no longer needed, Sirius left the room, leaving Justin to break some tough news to Luna.

Luna quickly recovered and she looked askance at Justin. "Why isn't George here? And where is everyone else?"

"The others knew you'd need some space."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid George has gone, Luna," Justin said gently, continuing to hold her.

"Where?" Luna asked, her lips trembling.

"To the Reserve."

"To be with Ginny?"

Justin nodded before explaining more fully. "I'm not making excuses for him and you are not to blame yourself for what happened..."

Luna grasped Justin's hand. "What happened?"

"Ginny tried to kill herself," Justin said, not seeing any way of breaking it gently to Luna. "She couldn't deal with the fact that her magic had gone. She was a mess."

Luna understood the suffocating feeling of terror that came with the knowledge that you could never perform magic again. "What happened?"

"We were all worried about you after your collapse, and Ginny was left alone in her room, since Charlie had decided to wait to leave as

he wanted to see how you were doing. The calming potion Sirius had given Ginny before the sentence wore off and she had to face what had happened. We could hear her screams from your room." Justin didn't tell Luna that the screams had sounded as though they had been coming from a wounded animal. "Of course, George and Charlie went running into her room to discover that she'd gone into the bathroom, broken a mirror and slashed her wrists. Charlie saved her life by sealing up the cuts and, as a healer, Sirius had little choice but to deal with Ginny's wounds. She was then sedated."

"And George felt guilty because he supported me," Luna surmised.

"Yes. He decided that Ginny would hurt herself if she was left unsupervised, something Charlie would have to do at night, and so when Charlie left, so did George."

"I thought he liked me," Luna murmured, tears running down her cheeks again.

"He did," Justin said having had quite a turbulent talk with George. "But he also said to tell you that he didn't think he could continue to have a relationship with you now, not after what's happened."

"Because he'd end up hating me."

"He didn't say that."

"But it's true." Not wanting to think about George, Luna asked after Padma. "I hope Padma doesn't mind that I'm hogging you."

Justin winced at the mention of Padma's name. "I probably shouldn't tell you this..."

"But you will," Luna said forcibly.

"We had an argument over how much time I've been spending in here with you," Justin admitted.

Luna had been joking about hogging Justin. "But we're just friends..."

"She's always been jealous of you," Justin revealed, although he knew that Padma would not like that he had.

This came as news to Luna. "Jealous of me?"

"I think it's to do with how protective people are of you," Justin said in response, before going further. "And I don't think I helped things when I called George a coward and broke his nose. I tried to explain to Pad that I'd have been as angry on behalf of any of my friends and that you're more than just a friend, you're more like my sister, but she didn't believe me and so we had an argument... she's moved out of our room and into Ginny's former room."

"Perhaps you'll make things up."

"Perhaps." However, given the scale of their final argument and given what they had said to each other, Justin doubted it although he didn't want to burden Luna by telling her this.

It was then that Luna thought about Ron. "Didn't Ron also want to go with his family or had Charlie and the others left by then?"

"They hadn't. They didn't actually go for two days, not until Charlie knew you were going to survive."

Luna gave a tearful smile. "He's always been nice to me."

"He said you were a sweet girl and that no matter what Ginny has done, it wasn't your fault," Justin said, passing on Charlie's words. "He also said that if you want him to come back and talk to you about what's happened, he will. He doesn't want you fretting over this."

Luna shook her head. "It wouldn't be fair on him but it's nice to know that he cares." She then reverted back to talking about Ron. "You still haven't told me what Ron's decided."

"Even after Ginny tried to kill herself, Ron said he still hates her and that they should have just left her to die," Justin said, having been shocked at Ron's vicious response to the news. "And he also called George a coward for dumping you before he also hit him, and then he said a lot of other things that aren't really polite enough to say in front of you."

"And how did Parvati take it?" Luna asked, wondering if she had reacted in a similar fashion to her sister.

"She backed Ron up with a few choice words I didn't even know she knew." Justin smiled at the memory of Ron's girlfriend taking George to task before he revealed that things hadn't ended there. "And when she'd finished, Harry also reamed George out before Charlie stepped in and prevented a full-out fight or the house exploding. Harry was so angry he was making the windows shake."

Although Luna was gratified that her friends had defended her, she also felt guilty about what had happened. "I've really made a mess of things for all of you, haven't I?"

Justin shook his head. "No."

"But Padma..."

"Luna, you need to know that my breaking up with Padma wasn't your fault. Things haven't been going so well between Padma and me for a while and I think she used you and this situation as an opportunity to end things."

"Just like George did with me," Luna said in a misery filled voice. "He said he would support me but instead he chose Ginny." Luna leant back against her pillows. "I think I hate her, Justin."

"We all do," Justin said truthfully.

"George doesn't." Luna then started to cry again and Justin clambered up on the bed beside her and held her while he did.

May 23rd 1997

Harry sighed as he lay naked next to Hermione. "I suppose we should go down to breakfast."

"Promise me that you'll eat something though," Hermione said sternly. "You've missed too many meals since you recovered."

"I keep forgetting about the time when I'm training," Harry said in his own defense. "I have to help those still trapped in Hogwarts."

"Harry, not everything is your fight," Hermione told him, not wanting Harry to take a further burden on his shoulders.

"But I feel as if it is," Harry said in a tired but determined voice. "And I know that I can't sit by and let people suffer."

"I understand," Hermione said, aware of Harry's frustration. "But you're not going to help anyone by not eating properly; you're going to wear yourself out if you don't take it easy."

"You didn't say that ten minutes ago," Harry pointed out.

Hermione blushed but stuck to her argument. "In that case, until you do eat properly again you can count me off the menu as well."

Harry rolled away from her. "Fine, but unlike you I'm not giving up on those in Hogwarts."

"Harry, I..." Hermione stopped speaking as Harry stomped into the bathroom and slammed the door behind him. She decided to use Luna's bathroom to shower in.

When Harry finally joined everyone for breakfast, Hermione didn't even spare Harry a glance, still angry with him at his tantrum. However, she wasn't the only person who was going to bring up the subject of Harry's lack of appetite.

"You need to eat more than that," Cordelia chided when she noticed how little food Harry had on his plate, concern for Harry's recovery uppermost in her mind.

Sirius agreed with her. "If you don't, Harry, then I'll ban you from vigorous exercise until you're eating properly."

Harry scowled at both of them. "Look, I know I'm not eating well, but I have other more important things on my mind than food, such as the fact that our Voldemort wannabe is riding roughshod over everyone. And I for one am not going to stand for it any longer."

"And tell me exactly what do you plan to do?" Remus asked, also worried about how hard Harry was pushing himself, even going so far as from banning the others from practicing with Harry.

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "But I do know that I can't sit here on my arse hoping that things will get better, because we know they won't. For starters, we need to find others who may have survived the attacks."

"There isn't anyone," Remus said brusquely, his own frustration showing. "I've tried every contact I have, and you know as well as I do that everyone would have headed for the Alpha and then the Beta sites. I would have ended up there myself if I hadn't been in Hogwarts."

"He must have been planning this for months," Hermione said, as she had been doing for some time.

Sirius disagreed in the same way he had been since Hermione first expressed her opinion. "I think to pull off something like this, he's been planning this for years."

"We already know what you both think and rehashing old information isn't helping," Harry said angrily. "If we can't find any Aurors or Unspeakables, then we have to get into Hogwarts, find out what is happening."

"Harry, I barely escaped alive from there," Remus reminded him. "You're not going in. Our wannabe would kill you and likely make an example of you before he did."

"Or Snape would," Justin added.

Harry's face took on a look of hatred at the mention of Snape. "Not if I kill him first."

Luna gasped, "Harry, you're not like that."

Harry could see that he had shocked everyone with his comment, but ever since he had recovered from his poisoning, he had been filled with a burning desire to seek revenge for what had happened. "I'm sorry, but I am and I hate him. We all know it was him who created that poison. He killed my friends and I think he deserves the same."

"So do I," Remus agreed. "But you don't want that on your conscience."

"I'd get over it," Harry said. "I got over the last Death Eater I killed after the Triwizard Tournament."

Everyone sat in stunned silence, except for Remus, who continued to argue with Harry. "You killed him in self defense, Harry. Taking a life in cold blood is very different."

"It didn't stop Snape," Harry growled, not wanting to listen to Remus. "I'm going to get into Hogwarts somehow and I'm going to kill him."

"Well, I'm not going to help you," Remus said firmly, not about to let Harry risk his life for what he believed to be a futile mission.

Upset, Harry hit out. "No, you're going to sit there like a coward instead."

Remus rose to his feet, his anger evident on his face. "Who the hell..."

Luna interrupted, putting her fingers in her mouth as she whistled loudly. Everyone looked at her in surprise. Since Luna had lost her magic, her usual happy go lucky attitude had vanished. And even though her magic had been restored to some extent, George's abandonment of her had changed Luna into a very different girl than she had once been, and she no longer seemed so delicate or gentle, her tone hard as she took Harry to task.

"If we start fighting amongst ourselves, we're going to do the job for whoever has taken over Hogwarts. So Harry, you are going to apologize to Remus, you're going to start eating properly and you're not going after Snape!"

Luna's chastisement worked where everyone's nagging had failed, and Harry turned to Hermione. "Before I apologize to Remus, I need to apologize to you. I've been like a bear with a sore head and I'm sorry."

"So am I," Hermione said, reaching across the table to take Harry's hand.

Harry then did as Luna had ordered and apologized to his guardian. "I'm sorry, Sir. I know you're not a coward and I shouldn't have taken my anger out on you but I feel so frustrated."

"As do I," Remus said as he reached over and squeezed Harry's other hand. "But I don't want you to risk your life by running off without thinking, not after coming so close to losing you once already."

Harry returned both squeezes before Hermione and Remus both let go of his hands as Luna continued with her thoughts.

"Even though I think going after Snape is suicidal, I do think Harry is right to some extent. We can't just sit and wait for something to happen. We have to do something, because if we don't, whoever is behind that gold mask won't stop at the wizarding world and soon the entire world will be his."

Sirius agreed with the girl. "As much as I hate to say it, Remus, Luna is right."

"Don't you think I've tried?" Remus asked in an exasperated voice. "You know as well as I do that when I haven't been training with Harry, I've been out looking for anyone who might know something."

Sirius soothed his friend's ruffled feathers. "I know that, Remus, but it's not working."

"So what do you suggest?"

"That we turn to a Death Eater and not an Auror or an Unspeakable. They may know more about who is behind the mask."

Remus shook his head as he caught onto who Sirius was suggesting. "I doubt Narcissa knows anything."

"It won't hurt to ask," Sirius countered. "In fact, I'll go."

Harry, who had quickly cottoned onto what Sirius was planning, disagreed. "No, Sirius. You said yourself if anyone worked out who you were, you'd be compromised."

"Harry's right," Remus said, and he ran a hand over his face. "I can't exactly go either, as from the posters I've seen, I'm on the capture or kill list."

Harry looked at Remus in surprise. "What list?"

Padma, who was sitting in the corner as far away from Justin as she could get, the two of them not having made things up, realized that they hadn't told Harry about it. "It's a list posted of everyone who escaped from Hogwarts. You're not on it though as the wannabe probably thinks you're dead. But then again that's probably because there's no known cure for the poison he used against you."

"Who's top of the list then?" Harry asked.

"I am," Remus said, giving a wry smile. "I think I pissed him off a little by escaping from under his nose."

"Then you definitely can't go," Harry told him. "As you pointed out to me, he'd kill you after making an example of you if he caught you. As I'm the only one who is believed to be dead, I should go."

"If you do go, how do you expect to get into where you're going?" Hermione asked.

"I was going to go in my Animagus form," Harry said, and he watched as Remus shook his head. "Why not?"

"Because you're too large and won't exactly blend in," Remus pointed out.

"I would," Hermione said quietly.

Harry immediately shook his head. "Absolutely not."

"Harry, no-one would suspect an owl of being a spy," Hermione argued. "So I'm going."

An argument ensued between Harry and Hermione, the rest watching on as it raged. This time Luna said nothing, able to see both sides of the argument, and it was Remus who finally called a halt to it, by backing Hermione.

"Harry, she's right. Hermione is our best option for getting in undetected. And before you say no again, you said yourself we can't just sit here, and that applies equally to all of us."

In response, Harry sagged. "I don't want to lose her anymore than you want to lose me."

"You won't... it's not as if she's going into Hogwarts," Sirius said. "She'll be going to Malfoy Manor. And given her Animagus form, she'll be in less danger than the rest of us because it will look as though she's just delivering a note."

Remus pounced on this idea. "So let's make it the simple task of really delivering a note and not making contact verbally. It would certainly be safer for Hermione."

Harry decided he preferred this idea to Hermione trying to make contact in person. "So what would it say?"

Ron came up with an idea. "Malfoy is a greedy git and he was always bragging about how easy it was to get Mummy and Daddy to send him money. Why not pretend it's from him and have Narcissa meet him outside of Hogsmeade? Someone could meet her there and bring her here to talk to her."

Cordelia interrupted the excited exchange. "I thought you said most people made their homes unplottable. How would you even find it to deliver the note?"

"I sort of know where Malfoy Manor is," Remus said.

"How?" Parvati asked.

"I've raided it a couple of times back when it wasn't hidden," Remus responded. "And even though I'm no longer sure of the exact location, I do know the roundabout area. If I get us close to it, we can wait until we see an owl trying to get in and Hermione can follow it." He turned to Harry. "I'm not taking you before you ask, but I promise won't leave until Hermione's back out safely."

Aware that this was their best option, Harry agreed to it, and Hermione rose to her feet. "I think I'd better go now before nerves get the better of me."

It was then that Ron came up with an even better idea. "Why don't you just ask Macclesby to contact Dobby?"

Remus thought this was an excellent suggestion. "Brilliant, Ron."

Parvati nudged her boyfriend who was looking rather pleased with himself. "That was rather clever."

Ron looked even more delighted to receive Parvati's compliment that he had Remus' and he missed what Remus said as he leant across to kiss Parvati.

"...and I therefore think that Hermione should accompany Dobby in her owl form if he agrees to help us."

Harry nodded. "I'd feel safer knowing that she was with him rather than simply flying in there on her own."

Macclesby was duly summoned and Dobby contacted, although it took some time.

On arrival, Dobby immediately bowed low before Justin, ignoring everybody else. "Hello, friend of Dobby. How can Dobby be of assistance?"

Justin smiled at the house-elf who obviously still favored him. "We need to get a message to your mistress but not via normal methods since we don't want Mrs. Malfoy to be put in danger."

Dobby rather liked that Justin cared about his mistress and he enthusiastically agreed to speak to Narcissa.

Malfoy Manor

Narcissa Malfoy turned at the tap on the window. She could see a small brown owl sitting outside. "Why hasn't it gone to the owlery?"

Lucius got up. "It might be an urgent missive for me." As he opened the window, the owl flew to Narcissa instead and held out its claw.

Narcissa took the note before dismissing the owl. "You can go."

Hermione was relieved that she could leave, and she flew straight out of the window, flapping her wings as hard as she could as flew into the grove of trees where Dobby had told her he would be waiting.

Inside Malfoy Manor, Narcissa sighed in imaginary resignation as she read the note, having already been primed by Dobby to expect it. "It's from Draco. He said he needs more money and wants me to meet him at Hogsmeade tomorrow."

Lucius didn't believe in denying his son anything, but he also had limitations. "You can go. He can have a hundred Galleons, but tell him that this is the last time."

May 24th 1997

Narcissa apparated to just outside of Hogsmeade, where she had been told she would be met, and she jumped when she heard her son's voice coming from behind her.

"Mother, what are you doing here?"

Narcissa immediately took out the purse that Lucius had instructed her to take, glad that she had had the foresight to bring it. "Your father and I thought you might want a little extra spending money, so I thought I'd see if you were around, as I had a little shopping to do."

Draco's eyes lit up with a greedy expression. "Thank you, Mother."

Narcissa handed over the purse. "You've earned it, Draco. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be on my way." As she walked away, Narcissa could hear her son crowing to his friends. She doubted, however, that the money would last very long, and next time there would be a note, a genuine note, coming from her son.

Narcissa had barely bid her son goodbye when an arm went around her waist and she felt a familiar tug. As soon as she was released, she swung around to face who had taken her. She watched as Remus dropped his invisibility spell. "I would have gone quietly."

"I'm enemy number one, right now," Remus reminded her. "And I'd prefer to keep hidden."

"What do you want?" Narcissa asked, Dobby having said little except that Remus urgently needed to speak to her.

"Your help."

"I don't know what I can do," Narcissa said as she sat down on the sofa in the bedroom that she assumed belonged to Remus. "Not only can I not go against Lucius, as you know well, but I spend most of my time in Malfoy Manor."

"We know that the Ministry has been taken, as has Azkaban and Hogwarts, but do you know of anything that you could tell us?" Remus asked in a plaintive voice.

Narcissa shook her head. "The only place I really get news about is Hogwarts, and that's because Lucius has been boasting about how favored Draco is."

"Favored?"

"The Dark Lord has certain students who are in charge of the others," Narcissa explained, able to discuss this freely as it was generally common knowledge. "As Lucius' son, Draco is one of them. He has his own suite of rooms, and he has privileges, such as being allowed to have his own house-elf, being able to boss the other students around, that sort of thing. For the other students, Hogsmeade weekends no longer exist, although students with a Dark Mark may come and go freely as they choose if they're not in lessons. I was lucky enough to run into Draco when I went into Hogsmeade and I handed over the money Lucius believed he had requested."

Remus took this in. "So Draco goes into Hogsmeade a lot?"

"So I believe," Narcissa said, and then she realized that Remus had to have a reason to ask, and she doubted she was going to like it. "Why?"

"We need to get into Hogwarts and try to rescue the students before the school year ends," Remus said, aware that Narcissa was going to balk when he told her how. "And after what you've just told me, Draco sounds like my way in."

Narcissa immediately shook her head. "I know that Draco isn't perfect, but he's still my son and I refuse to let you put his life in danger. It isn't his fault this happened."

Remus had expected this and he went on the offensive. "Try telling that to the parents of the Muggle-borns who died in torment while I listened, unable to do anything to help them. More than thirty students died, Narcissa, some families losing more than one child, and your son stood by and did nothing."

Although she knew that Tom had taken over Hogwarts, Narcissa had no idea what he had done to the students, and she was shocked and it showed. "Students died?"

Remus told her what had happened. "...and Susan Bones died when we were unable to help her."

"And Harry Potter?" Narcissa asked in a trembling voice as Dobby had failed to mention Harry's presence, not realizing it was important.

"He survived, although barely," Remus said before asking, "So, now you know the truth, are you still willing to help us?"

"I don't know," Narcissa said.

"Then let's go and meet everyone and see if we can't change your mind," Remus said.

On arriving in the dining room, Remus filled everyone in on what Narcissa had told him and that he wanted to take Draco's place.

Harry mulled it over. "I should go."

Remus immediately disagreed. "It's too dangerous, Harry. If we go along that route, then it should be me."

Narcissa thought he was mad and she threw up a privacy bubble. "Remus, if the Dark Lord catches you, he'll execute you in the most painful way possible. I've seen him kill someone like you before and it wasn't pretty."

"Everyone here knows I'm a werewolf; in fact I'm sure most of Hogwarts probably does right now," Remus told her, dropping the

bubble. "And I'm well aware of what our supposed Dark Lord is likely to do to me if he manages to get his hands on me; he's already had a practice run."

It was then that Narcissa caught onto what Remus had said. "You said 'supposed'. Why?"

"We're not sure your Dark Lord is truly Voldemort," Sirius said, answering his cousin's question in Remus' stead. "That's one of the reasons we contacted you, but it's obvious you believe he's Voldemort."

"I do, but why don't you?" Narcissa asked, shivering at Sirius' use of 'Voldemort'.

"Because he feels wrong," Remus said in brief. "I'll explain more if you agree to us letting use Draco."

"Even if the Dark Lord isn't the man you believe him to be, what about what he would do to my son if he found out what we're doing?" Narcissa asked. "I know that Draco might not be an angel but I'm not sure I'm willing to stand by and put him in danger like this. He is still my son after all."

Ron's lip curled up in disgust. "Yes, and I saw your precious son's face when we were forced to lie down and our friends were being poisoned. He looked well happy with himself, and I think he deserves everything he gets."

Sirius agreed with Ron. "Narcy, I know you don't want to endanger Draco but Ron is right. Draco made his bed and now he has to lie in it, just as any of us would if we were in that position. And besides, he'll only be in danger if whoever goes into Hogwarts get caught."

"No," Narcissa said. "I refuse."

Remus made a suggestion in the hope of swaying Narcissa. "If you agree, then I give you my word that once we have what we need, we'll obliviate Draco and release him."

Thinking about what had happened to the Muggle-borns, Justin disagreed with Remus. "The little so and so deserves everything he

gets. He joined this so called Dark Lord and so he should take his medicine just like Ginny did."

This caught Narcissa's attention. "What do you mean?"

"She was stripped of her magic," Ron said. "And she deserved it."

Narcissa's face tightened. "Why?"

"Because she failed to help the Muggle-borns by sabotaging the potion when she could have, and because she was going to commit murder to become a Death Eater," Remus said in a resigned voice, wishing that Justin and Ron had said nothing as he knew that this was not exactly going to sway Narcissa to the cause.

He was right and, far from impressed with what she had just learned, Narcissa shook her head. "I'm very sorry, but I can't do it."

Deciding that the time for playing nice had gone, Sirius roughly grabbed his cousin by the arm. "Excuse us while I speak to Narcy alone." He then side-apparated her into the study and dragged her towards Remus' pensieve. "Watch what Remus went through and then tell me you can't do it."

Narcissa had no choice but to enter the pensieve where Sirius held onto her as she watched a short snippet of what Remus had had to listen to as the students had died. "And you really think that showing me this is going to change my mind when the same could happen to Draco?"

"Then perhaps a different memory," Sirius said, and he chose one of Remus being tortured by Tom. "Now tell me you're going to stand by and let Remus go through this again, because you know as well as I do that if you don't let us use Draco succinctly, then Remus is probably going to try to find a way back in there."

Sirius had discovered Narcissa's Achilles heel, and she was in tears as she covered her ears to drown out the screams of the man she was still in love with, even now. "Oh Merlin! Please stop it, Sirius."

Sirius did, pulling her from the pensieve. Once outside of it, he turned his tearful cousin to face him, this time his voice very much softened.

"You have to help us, Narcy. It's the right thing to do. We need to find out who is hiding behind that mask, because I'm damn certain it isn't the real Dark Lord, no matter what he would have everyone else believe. And if you don't help us, then Remus will go back in without any cover, and this time I'm certain that your Dark Lord will make his end long and painful if he catches him."

Narcissa was torn. "But Draco's my son, and..."

Sirius interrupted her. "Is he?"

Narcissa felt shock run through her at the question. "How...?"

"The heir ring Draco was wearing when Remus sneaked me into Hogwarts – it's no more genuine than the Family ring I placed on his finger. I therefore tried to figure out why Draco wasn't the Black heir after all and so I cast the Familius spell. Imagine my surprise when Draco was listed on the parchment but he also had a second name below his, Julian Logan, and it showed that he was my heir – how can that be?"

Aware the game was up, Narcissa confessed. "I've always been afraid that someone would find out the truth... Draco was born a squib and so Lucius wanted to 'deal' with him."

"You mean kill him, don't you?" Sirius interjected.

"Yes," Narcissa said, wiping away a tear. "Then he came up with an alternative: his mistress, Lucy, had just given birth to a healthy son, a magical son, a son named Julian."

Sirius was stunned as he figured out why Julian's name had appeared below Draco's on the parchment. "Draco took Julian's place... that's why he has two different names!"

Narcissa burst into tears. "Yes. I didn't want Lucius to do it, but he said if I didn't agree he'd kill Draco. I didn't have any choice."

"And this Lucy simply let Lucius take her son and swap him out for Draco?"

Narcissa shook her head. "She doesn't know. She thinks her son is a squib; but Julian's not her son, he's mine."

"So why are you fighting so hard for Lucius' son?"

"Because although he wasn't born to me, he still feels like my son, as much as Julian does in fact."

"So what happens if this Lucy ever finds out the truth?"

"Lucius has placed spells on her to discourage from doing so," Narcissa said heavily. "The only people who know the truth are Lucius, Severus, you and me."

"Snivellus knows?"

"He helped us find the spell to change Draco's hair from red to blonde and vice versa," Narcissa revealed, before asking, "Are you going to tell anyone?"

"What do you think?"

"Please don't. Lucius would kill me."

"Then I suggest you change your mind about letting your pretend son help us."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll take up my right as the Head of the Black Family to visit retribution upon Lucius' son for Regulus' death at your hand," Sirius threatened.

Narcissa decided that Sirius was bluffing. "I know you. You'd never hurt someone else for what I've done."

"Narcissa, you don't know anything about me, you just think you do. Until I was overruled by Harry and Remus, I was ready to condemn Ginny Weasley to death for doing as little as Draco." Sirius then gripped Narcissa's chin so that she had to look into his eyes. "And I swear on Remus' life that if you refuse to help us, then I will hunt down and kill Draco, because believe me the little bastard deserves

it. And it's not as if your real son wouldn't still be alive to replace him."

Narcissa had told the truth about her feelings for the boy who had replaced her son, and she felt a shudder of fear run through her at the cold look in Sirius' eyes, and, suddenly very afraid that he would indeed follow through with his threat, Narcissa visibly sagged. "Very well, what do you need me to do?"

Next Chapter: Remus runs into an old foe; Harry makes a fortuitous mistake.

Chapter 57: Slytherin!

26th May 1997

Draco made his way past the Shrieking Shack together with Blaise and his new girlfriend, Gabriella Lewis, a seventh year Ravenclaw. None of them saw the attack coming, and before they knew what had happened, they had all been stunned and portkeyed out of the area.

When he was brought round, Draco was more than a little anxious to discover that he was not only chained to a bed but that he was also face to face with Remus and he visibly recoiled. "What do you want?"

Remus could smell Draco's fear and he used this to his advantage. "Well, I could wait until the night of the full moon and have a little fun with you, or..."

Draco gulped and sweat broke out on his forehead as he waited for Remus to finish his sentence. When he didn't and the silence seemed to stretch on interminably, it got too much for Draco and he screamed at Remus, "What do you want from me?"

"Your body," Remus said with a nasty grin.

"You're going to rape me?" Draco asked in a panicky voice, his fear rising tenfold.

"My tastes are a little more refined than that," Remus said coldly. "No, Draco, you're going to remain my prisoner until I no longer have any use for you. First of all, though, I need a hair."

Draco could do nothing as Remus plucked a hair from his head, and he finally worked out what Remus had meant by his body and, without thinking, he cockily told Remus he would fail. "You'll never get into Hogwarts polyjuiced as me. You have to have a real Dark Mark to get inside."

Remus knew then that they might have a big problem and he headed out of the room, locking it securely behind him, before joining Harry and the others. "Draco has just told me that I need a

genuine Dark Mark to get inside of Hogwarts. Narcissa, do you know anything about it, anything at all?"

"No, I haven't been to Hogwarts in a very long time," Narcissa said, having reluctantly joined the group that morning, mostly because she was worried about her son, especially after Sirius' threat.

Sirius looked grimly at her. "You're sure?"

Narcissa nodded. "Yes."

Remus could feel Narcissa's fear and he excused himself, before pulling Sirius out of the room with him. "What's going on? And don't say nothing - I can feel how frightened Narcissa is of you."

"I threatened to kill Draco if she didn't help us," Sirius disclosed.

"And she believed you?" Remus asked in an astonished voice.

"Yes, I was very convincing," Sirius said. "And if I hadn't done it she would never have helped us, and before you try arguing with me, tell me you thought any differently."

Remus had been about to argue but the feelings he had been getting from Narcissa had been negative to say the least. "I can't but it still doesn't make it right."

"And I'm not going to put it right," Sirius said firmly. "If I was to go back in that room and tell Narcy that I was angry and that I had threatened Draco in the heat of the moment she'd probably back out. And I'm sorry, Remus, but your safety is far more important to me than that little bastard's or Narcy's ever will be."

Remus read between the lines. "You're still angry with her for what she did to Reg, aren't you?"

Sirius was about to dispute Remus' assertion but then he let out a shaky breath and said, "Yes, I am, and I know Reg deserved it but just like George with Ginny, at the end of the day he was still my sibling and I loved him."

"I can't say I understand that feeling because I don't..."

"But you have a sister..."

"Who is a little snob who doesn't want anything to do with a brother who's a werewolf," Remus reminded him, having told Sirius about Nicole, his half-sister. "And right now this isn't the time for that conversation."

"I know. So will you tell Narcy the truth?"

"No," Remus said, admitting that Sirius was right. "If I do I'm certain she won't help."

"Then we're agreed - she doesn't need to know I was bluffing."

When they returned, the others were bandying various ideas about and they walked in just as Hermione came up with one she put to Narcissa. "I was wondering whether I could take your place at Manor Malfoy and you could find out what's going on in Hogwarts."

Narcissa brought up a problem. "I'm afraid that won't work, the wards to the Manor would react badly to you."

"But I got inside last time without any problems," Hermione reminded her.

"Owls are genetically keyed into the wards, otherwise we'd never be able to receive mail," Narcissa told her. "But the moment you changed back into human form, the wards would detect that you're not me. And even if they didn't, I'm quite certain that you wouldn't want to sleep with Lucius."

Hermione shuddered in disgust. "Not in the slightest, so what are we going to do?"

Remus came up with what he believed was the only option. "If I need a Dark Mark then that's what I'm going to have to get."

Harry immediately stomped on the idea. "No way! You're not joining him."

"I don't mean take a real one, Harry, at least not one from our wannabe," Remus clarified, before turning to face Narcissa. "I want you to give me a Dark Mark."

Narcissa was unable to help. "I don't know how."

"But you were given a Dark Mark," Padma pointed out. "Can't you just copy what Voldemort did?"

"I know the incantation but there's more to it than that," Narcissa told the girl, who like the others had gotten used to calling You-Know-Who 'Voldemort'.

Remus agreed with her. "She's right. It's a bastardized form of the Protean Charm with other spells, such as a summoning charm and a pain curse, woven into it. I know how to inflict one but I can't inflict one on myself as I can't enslave my own soul."

Luna interrupted with a good question. "How do you even know how to cast one in the first place?"

"Let's just say that not all the experimentation done at the Ministry of Magic is above board. And even so, I've only done this twice, and one of those times it failed and I simply blew a hole through the person's arm instead."

Ron was confused and it showed. "Um, why would you need to know how to put a Dark Mark on someone?"

"Because ever since we learned Voldemort might have come back, and Destin Simon confirmed the same, we've been aware that we might need to infiltrate his army and bearing a Dark Mark might be the only way to get in," Remus explained. "I admit, we didn't expect his wannabe to attack en masse and so our practical efforts have been for nothing."

"Okay, but that still doesn't help us with our problem of how to inflict one," Narcissa pointed out.

Sirius made a suggestion. "If Remus can explain about the Dark Mark and how to create it in a little more in detail to me, I can probably cast the spell on him. After Defense, Charms was my best subject. I'd offer to go myself, but I know that Remus would say that I'm a security risk."

"You are," Remus confirmed and then he hurriedly began to explain to his friend how he believed the Mark worked, and Sirius listened, nodding and interjecting a question here and there.

"Okay, I believe I can do it and given that I have to temper my spells on my patients, I should hopefully also be able to temper this one. Roll up your sleeve."

"I really think..." Padma tried to interrupt again, only for Harry to shut her up.

"It's been decided, Padma."

Although he was nervous, Remus wanted it over and done with, to say nothing of the fact that he also knew they were running out of time and so he held out his bare arm. "Just do it, Sirius."

Remus collapsed to his knees in pain as Sirius incanted the charm, and Remus wished he had not been so hasty to offer himself up. It hurt infinitely worse than transforming and far more than the Cruciatus curse that Snape had used on him during his imprisonment at Hogwarts. Suddenly it was over and Remus was sucking in air as he strove to regain his balance.

Sirius handed a painkilling potion over and Remus gratefully took it, frowning as the pain subsided but didn't disappear.

"It still hurts."

"It will fade," Narcissa said knowledgeably. "But Sirius must have pushed some power into the spell for you to scream like that."

"I thought I knew how to temper it," Sirius said sheepishly to Remus. "But obviously I was wrong. Sorry, Moony."

Remus rubbed his left arm. "It's okay, Sirius. Let's just hope it works when I'm trying to get into Hogwarts."

Hermione had flown over the path that led to the school gates and so she knew how heavily guarded the school was, and so she came up with an excellent observation. "Maybe there's another alternative. If you have to have a real Dark Mark then our wannabe must have invented a spell to detect if it's a genuine Protean charm. How else

would he know whether your Dark Mark is authentic or not? And since we know that Hogsmeade is guarded now, wouldn't it make sense that you'd also require a real Dark Mark to gain entrance there as well? So why not try out the prototype there?"

"That's a brilliant idea, Hermione. It would certainly be safer for me than trying to get into Hogwarts and failing."

Sirius decided to get things moving. "Then you need to get to Hogsmeade now. If they had been walking, Malfoy and his friends should have arrived at Hogsmeade by now and we're going to miss the window if you don't get out there."

"How are we going to explain why Draco and Lewis are missing?" Luna asked, suddenly thinking of something that might cause a problem.

Narcissa hurriedly provided them with an answer, Sirius' threat still very vivid in her mind. "Draco isn't faithful to Pansy. You can tell anyone if they ask that he stopped to indulge his baser needs – it wouldn't be the first time Draco has done this to his friend."

Remus tapped his ring, leaving someone who looked very much like Blaise Zabini standing in his place. "Then it's time to go."

Hogsmeade

Aware that Harry, Sirius, Justin, Ron and Ernie were hidden and watching him, ready to provide back-up if needed, Remus strolled towards Hogsmeade, his heart pounding in his chest. He jumped when a voice yelled out 'Blaise', and it took Remus a moment to react as he remembered he should be answering the call. He turned around to find himself facing Pansy Parkinson. "Pansy."

"Where are Malfoy and Lewis?" Pansy asked.

Remus hoped Narcissa was right about Draco as he said, "Um, they stopped off for a few minutes."

Pansy looked up at Remus. "You're letting him fuck your girlfriend?"

Remus was rather taken aback by Pansy's base reaction, but he reacted equally defensively. "I don't own her anymore than you own Draco."

"That's different and you know it," Pansy snapped, not liking the situation being thrown in her face.

Remus could feel Pansy's hurt and he instantly became contrite. "Look, I'm sorry. Can I make it up to you by offering to buy you a drink?"

"You can," Pansy said and she walked up to the newly erected gate where she held out her left arm and revealed the Dark Mark, a black cloud appearing above it.

And then it was Remus' turn.

In the bushes, the back-up team waited, their wands withdrawn, only to sink back with relief as Remus was admitted to Hogsmeade, seemingly without a problem.

Inside the gates, Remus followed Pansy into the Three Broomsticks. He was dismayed to discover that there was no Rosmerta, and everybody drinking there were either obviously Death Eaters, as the masks on the tables proved, or former students from Hogwarts. Remus' biggest shock, however, was finding out who was serving behind the bar.

"I'll have white wine, Blaise," Pansy said before wandering away to procure a table.

Remus fished around in his pockets and pulled out some money. He then asked for a white wine and a firewhiskey. Felicity Gotobed, the former Transfiguration teacher, served him quietly and Remus took the drinks over to Pansy, who stared in astonishment at him.

"I thought you hated that stuff."

"I felt like a change," Remus lied, and he sat down, his face tense as he scanned the pub.

Pansy thought he seemed out of sorts and she jumped to the wrong conclusion. "Blaise, I'm sorry I was shitty to you back there. But I always believed Lewis and Draco hated each other to be honest."

"So did I," Remus lied again, barely knowing Gabriella all that well despite having taught her for NEWT history.

Pansy reached out and took Remus' hand, patting it in a sympathetic gesture. "You know very well that it's just a passing fancy on Draco's part. He always goes back to Greengrass in the end."

Now Remus was confused, given that he believed that Pansy was Draco's long term girlfriend. "What about you?"

"You know I don't give a shit who he fucks as long as he stays away from me," Pansy said bitterly, before remembering who she was talking to. "Sorry, Blaise, but he makes me angry, and you really don't deserve this after the whole Weasley thing."

Remus could feel animosity coming off Pansy in waves as she mentioned Ginny. "That bitch is in the past, and, like Draco, it's probably just a passing fling on Gaby's part."

"You're going to forgive her?" Pansy asked in surprise.

"I'm going to end up forgiving Draco so I might," Remus said. Suddenly he encountered a scent he had come across before on more than one occasion, and he glanced across the room as the front door opened to reveal several men, before he hurriedly got to his feet. "I'm sorry but I think I'd like to be alone."

Believing that Blaise was upset over his girlfriend's defection, Pansy gave Remus a consolatory smile. "I'll see you back at school."

Remus hurriedly left the bar by the back door, before nodding at the Death Eaters on guard at the gate and walking away. The moment he was out of sight of Hogsmeade, he hissed quietly, "Sirius?"

Suddenly he felt a familiar tug as a hand closed around his wrist and then he was back at Potter Place, where he sat down with relief. "That was a close call."

"What happened?" Sirius asked worriedly, thinking Remus had gone rather pale.

"I was having a drink with Pansy Parkinson when Greyback walked in," Remus said, his voice revealing his distress as it was shaking.

"Who's Greyback?" Harry asked, confused as to why this would bother Remus, who he rarely saw so shook up.

"Another werewolf," Remus said in a voice as bitter as Pansy's had been. "Actually, he's the werewolf who turned me and if he's on our wannabe's side then it's going to be a problem."

"Because he'll scent you if you go into Hogwarts," Hermione said in a quiet voice as she worked out what Remus' problem was going to be and why he was so disturbed. "You were very lucky he didn't in Hogsmeade."

"Some werewolves have a better sense of smell than others," Remus explained. "But even so, if Greyback had gotten much closer to me I don't doubt he'd have figured out what I was."

"Then I'm going to have to take your place," Harry said without a second's hesitation.

Ron disagreed. "I'll do it."

Harry shook his head. "Ron, I hate to say it but you hate the Slytherins and you wouldn't do a very good job of hiding it."

Ernie also jumped in, although the idea of going into enemy territory terrified him. "I'll do it. I don't really like Slytherins but I think I could hide the fact."

"So could I," Justin said.

"Or how about me?" Hermione asked before Harry could respond to Justin and Ernie.

"No girl can do this," Remus told her, not using the argument Hermione had expected. "Do you really think you could deal with having to be a boy? It's going to be bad enough for whoever has to take Draco's place, let alone a girl."

Hermione blushed, as did the other girls, as they all figured out what Remus meant. "Oh!"

"So which of us is going to go in?" Justin asked, just as determined as Harry was to play his part.

Cordelia had remained quiet up until then, although every instinct had her wanting to scream, 'not my son'. Instead she said, "You should draw straws – whoever gets the shortest straw goes in."

"Then include me," Sirius demanded.

Remus immediately knocked him back. "You already pointed out that you would too much of a risk, Sirius, and that hasn't changed just because of Greyback. If the wannabe ever discovered who you were, he could send you back here as a spy. I'm sorry but if we're going to do this, it really comes down to Harry, Ernie or Justin taking the Mark and going in, but in truth I'd rather it was me."

Sirius backed off and then nodded towards Cordelia. "Your idea is the best. Can you do the straws?"

When Cordelia returned, Justin's hand was shaking as Harry let him go first. He was both relieved and angry when he drew a long straw. "Fuck!"

Cordelia again kept quiet, understanding Justin's frustration. She then stepped over to Ernie and with a shaking hand he also drew a long straw.

With the decision made, Harry turned to Sirius. "Give me a Dark Mark. Remus can check it now that he knows the spell so that I don't have to go into Hogsmeade."

Now Remus balked. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea."

"You were all for it when it was going to be you, so yes, it's still a good idea," Harry argued as he began to roll up his sleeve. "We won't get another chance like this."

"Harry, you do realize that this is going to hurt, don't you?" Sirius warned. "I will try and temper the spell but I might fail just as I did with Remus." He turned to Remus. "Unless you want to do this..."

Remus refused, unable to bear the thought of inflicting that much pain on Harry, and he also suspected that he might subconsciously cause the spell to fail because of that. "You've already succeeded once. I think it's best if you do it again."

And so Sirius touched his wand to Harry's arm, imagining in his mind what they needed, before he incanted the spell. "Morsmordre."

Unfortunately Sirius was no better this time, and after screaming at the pain, Harry was sick to his stomach the moment Sirius finished.

Sirius went green. "Excuse me."

As he cleaned up, Remus grinned despite the lack of levity in the moment. "I never understood why he wanted to be a Healer when he can't stand the sight of vomit."

"I don't care," Harry bit out, his voice filled with pain. "Just pass me a fucking painkilling potion."

Remus didn't berate Harry for his use of bad language – he knew only too well how bad the pain was. "Here."

With tears rolling down his cheeks, Harry leant back against a chair as he knocked back the potion. "I didn't honestly think it would hurt that much." He looked up at Remus. "You'd better tell me exactly what happened between you and Pansy, so at least I've got a heads up."

After checking that the Dark Mark had worked, Remus relayed what he had learnt. "...so I don't think Pansy is exactly enamored of Draco, and we'll need to make sure that both Zabini and Lewis believe that Lewis has been with Draco."

Narcissa pulled a face. "I don't want my son being involved in a duel. Blaise would massacre him."

Remus came up with the solution. "Then I'll tell Zabini that he's forgiven Draco and Lewis, but I have no idea why he would."

"I can think of something," Narcissa interceded. "Blaise slept with Draco's cousin, Karenina, when he stayed with us over Christmas. It took all of Lucius' diplomacy to talk his sister out of not telling her husband what had happened."

"Then we'll make him feel guilty about that," Remus decided. He then turned to Harry who, as an Unspeakable, had a ring like the one he had given Sirius, and he himself owned. "You know how your ring works, so it's time."

"I need to be sure that I'm spot on since this is going to be long-term," Harry said as he looked at himself in the mirror.

"Let's go visit Draco," Remus suggested.

Draco was more than a little disturbed to see himself coming through the door with Remus. "You won't get away with this."

Harry grinned and flashed his arm. "Show him."

Remus aimed his wand at Harry's Dark Mark and repeated the spell he had used a short time earlier. "Comprobus Morsmordre."

Draco was shocked as a black cloud appeared above Harry's arm. "You're a traitor to the Dark Lord by helping them."

"I certainly hope so," Harry said, glad that Draco had no idea who he was really. He looked at Remus. "What do you think?"

Remus aimed his wand at Draco and Draco was more than a little nervous to discover his clothes had vanished. He was then unbound and hauled to his feet, fighting hard to overcome Remus, but failing as Remus held him up to look over him. "He's got a two inch scar, here, on his left lower back, just above what would be his beltline."

Harry thought for a moment about the scar. "You'd better check the positioning when we're done. Anything else?"

"A birth mark in the shape of a star on his left hip," Remus said, spinning a red-faced and protesting Draco around to face him.

Harry glanced at it, not really wanting to look too closely at a naked Draco. "Got it." He grinned at Draco, who was doing his best to shield his private regions from Harry's and Remus' view. "I shouldn't worry, Malfoy. I've got no wish to see that. I'm bigger anyway."

"It doesn't mean you know how to use it!" Draco snapped out, more than a tad mortified at Harry's comment.

"At least I know how to keep mine in my pants," Harry retorted, before using their recently garnered knowledge about Draco's sex life. "Unlike you from what I hear. That's pretty shitty screwing around behind Parkinson's back."

"I'm a pure-blood and can do what I like," Draco came back at Harry as his clothes were replaced. "I bet you can't say the same."

"No, I can't," Harry admitted freely. "But I'd rather be a half-blood who understands what fidelity means than a lowlife piece of scum like you."

Remus flicked his wand and Draco found himself shackled to the wall, allowing him to stand up and move around. He glared at Remus. "It should be you chained like this, half-breed!"

Remus growled low in his throat, taking satisfaction when Draco paled and backed away. "I suggest you watch your mouth, Malfoy. Just remember that this half-breed is the one who gets to say whether you live or die when all of this is over."

Harry watched in amusement as Draco went even paler, before Harry made a demand of Draco. "I need to know what you know about what's going on at Hogwarts."

Draco gave a slow smile, glad that he was about to savor a minor victory, as Tom had asked for an oath before allowing Draco to become privy to some of the more important things that were happening in Hogwarts. "I can't. I've sworn an oath to my Master."

Determining that Draco was telling the truth, Remus still aimed his wand at Draco to be sure. "Legilimens." A few minutes later he withdrew. "Fuck! He's telling the truth."

"Then I'll just have to wing it," Harry decided, before he nodded at the door. "As much as I've enjoyed baiting Malfoy, I need to go."

Remus followed Harry downstairs where everyone was waiting. After Remus had checked Harry's back and discovered the scar was in place, Harry tapped the ring to lock in the image and Remus shook his hand. "Be careful." He then hugged Harry, and one by one, so did the others.

When it came down to Hermione, Harry led his tearful girlfriend out into the hallway. "Don't worry. I promise I'll be back."

Hermione buried her head in Harry's chest, her tears falling faster. "I love you."

"And I love you," Harry responded before kissing the top of her head. "I'd kiss you properly but not looking like this."

Hermione didn't care and she pulled Harry's head down and kissed him thoroughly. "I know it's you inside. Please don't take any risks."

"I won't," Harry promised.

He turned as Remus and Sirius came into the hallway, hovering Lewis and Zabini in front of them, before lowering them down.

"We'll apparate behind the Shrieking Shack." Sirius then vanished with Lewis, Remus following behind with Zabini. Ron, Justin and Ernie then also disappeared.

Harry gave Hermione one last hug and then vanished.

Arriving back in the woods with Harry, Remus obliviated his captives before turning to Harry. "We'll all be waiting as close as we can in case of trouble. If that looks as though it's going to be the case, then get out." He placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Promise me you'll be careful."

"I will," Harry promised, and with a churning stomach he waved Remus and the others off before turning his wand on Lewis and Zabini. "Finite."

Gabriella took a second to seemingly come round and, believing she was in the middle of an argument with her boyfriend, she started crying and pleading. "I'm sorry, Blaise. I don't know why I did it."

Hoping he was acting in character, Harry grinned. "I do."

Blaise turned on the boy he thought was his friend. "Shut up, Draco. You've done enough damage."

Harry sighed contemptuously. "Blaise, I don't want us to fall out over this. But what can I say? She was up for it and I wasn't going to say no."

Blaise scowled. "But you could have picked on someone else."

"And so could you when you slept with my cousin at Christmas," Harry retorted, watching the color drain from Gabriella's face before it went red.

Gabriella turned a furious face to Blaise. "You bastard!"

Blaise glared at Harry. "I think you should go, Draco."

Harry used the proffered exit and left the couple in the middle of a furious argument. As he approached the outskirts of Hogwarts, his stomach began to roil once more as he noted that there were almost twenty guards, and worse, he felt the sizzle of a ward before he was even within forty feet of the gates, and he wondered if the others who were trailing him had discovered it as well.

His roiling stomach went over when one of the guards approached him. "Password."

Harry could feel sweat rolling down the back of his neck, as this was something they hadn't expected. He therefore made a shot in the dark, readying himself to draw his wands and run. "Pure-blood."

When no-one attacked him, Harry guessed he had gotten the password right and he went to move forward, only for a Death Eater to grab his arm. "Not so fast. You seem to have forgotten something, Malfoy."

For a moment Harry couldn't think straight, his nerves almost overwhelming him. Then he forced himself to relax and remembering what the password had driven out of his mind, he rolled up his sleeve. "You mean this?"

The Death Eater touched his wand to it and uttered the revealing spell. He then nodded. "You can pass."

Harry experienced the strangest sensation as he passed through the gates, almost like a sharp electric shock mixed with icy water. He guessed it had to be some sort of ward, although he knew that it was not one that Remus had ever described before, but for some unknown reason, Harry had the distinct feeling that he had encountered a ward like this before although he was unable to recall where. He also realized that he only had a vague idea as to where the entrance to Slytherin was, having decided not to risk taking the Marauders Map into Hogwarts with him.

Spotting Pansy Parkinson ahead of him on the path, Harry decided to try and use her. "Hey, Pansy, wait up."

Pansy swung around, a little surprised to see her boyfriend coming up behind her and wearing a smile. "I thought you weren't speaking to me."

"I've changed my mind," Harry said, having no idea why the couple wasn't speaking, although he suspected it might have something to do with Draco's infidelity.

"You mean you want sex," Pansy responded, her tone more than a little bitter.

"You know me better than I know myself," Harry said, although sex with Pansy was obviously the last thing he wanted.

"So, shall we get it over with?" Pansy asked.

Harry held out a hand and politely said, "After you."

"And who said gallantry wasn't dead," Pansy drawled, but nevertheless she led the way.

Harry said little as they entered Hogwarts and then walked down a corridor, nodding politely at two Death Eaters who were obviously some sort of guards. After numerous twists and turns they soon reached a piece of wall that looked like any other.

Pansy stood in front of it and said, "Slytherin Triumphant."

Harry had to resist rolling his eyes. Heading into the Slytherin common room, he made sure not to stare.

Pansy swung around. "We'll have to use your room if you want sex right now. The last I knew, Tracey had one of the guards in ours."

Harry found himself wondering why everyone was in the common room and no lessons were going on. But he had no wish to give himself away, and so instead he held out his hand once more. "After you again."

"You're never usually this polite," Pansy remarked.

Harry thought quickly and came up with a remark he hoped an idiot like Draco would use. "I like to watch your arse as you walk."

"Figures," Pansy retorted, but it was obviously the right thing to say as she moved away from the common room and up a green hued stone corridor. She kept on going until she reached the last door and then she stood aside. "It's all yours, Draco."

Harry just hoped that Draco had no password to get into his room. Placing his hand on the handle, it turned easily. Obviously Draco felt secure enough to leave his door unlocked, and Harry wondered why Pansy had let him go in first. He guessed it must have been because she was trying to put off what she thought lay ahead as he noticed that she had slowly started to unbutton her blouse the moment the door had closed behind her. Alarmed, Harry moved to stop her. "Don't do that."

"Just a quickie then?" Pansy asked in a dull voice as she reached up under her skirt to pull off her panties.

"I didn't actually say I wanted sex, you just presumed it," Harry hurriedly said before the girl showed him more than he wanted to see.

"You don't want sex?" Pansy asked in bewilderment. "Since when?"

"It gets a little boring," Harry said in an airy voice.

Pansy angrily snapped, "Is that why you started fucking Lewis as well as Greengrass and myself?"

Harry answered with a question. "What do you think?"

"It really doesn't matter what I think, Draco." Pansy headed towards a door on the far wall. "Your father and my mother have decreed we should marry, and I don't have a lot of say in the matter."

Harry winced at how hard Pansy slammed the door. He surveyed the room while she was obviously in what had to be a private bathroom. "How the privileged live!"

Draco's bedroom was huge and it was dominated by a four poster bed. On the left wall stood three wardrobes and opposite them, a massive dresser. A writing desk that had to be an antique graced the wall on the same side as the entrance, and the entrance to the bathroom was next to the bed. An open archway led into a small sitting room that was furnished with black leather armchairs, and Harry could see a small bar set up against the far wall.

Harry dropped onto the bed, trying to take everything in, and he glanced up as Pansy came back in, her eyes reddened. He felt awful for upsetting the girl, even though he knew she was a Death Eater and probably deserved everything she got. However, he still felt as though he owed her a debt for saving his life during his first year. "I'm sorry if I upset you."

"Thank you, Draco," Pansy said, and she sat down opposite Harry and sighed wistfully. "I wish it could be like it was when we first started dating."

Harry was once more at a loss, and so he went with a generic question. "Why?"

"Because you were so sweet to me, and the first time we fu... made love was wonderful," Pansy said in a breathless voice. "You were so

gentle. Do you remember how you took me on that picnic and we sat beneath that massive oak that borders your parents' lake?"

Harry had to go with the flow and said, "Of course I do."

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Harry realized that Pansy was pulling out her wand.

With Harry reacting even faster than Pansy, the pair of them found themselves facing off against each other across the bed.

Pansy slowly stood up. "You're not Malfoy. Who are you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Harry retorted. "So why don't you lower your wand?"

Pansy shook her head. "That's not going to happen. You're not Malfoy and nothing you can say will convince me otherwise."

Harry knew the game was up, but he didn't lower his wand. "What gave me away?"

"Our first time was not in a romantic setting under a tree," Pansy snapped, and she pointed at the bed. "Malfoy raped me there on that bed when I refused to have sex with him."

"That still hasn't answered my question," Harry reminded her.

"Malfoy said I have the most disgusting arse he has ever seen," Pansy informed Harry. "It didn't occur to me that something was wrong though until you practically ran a mile at the idea of having sex with me. Malfoy never turns down sex, not even with someone he thinks is as disgusting as I am. It wouldn't matter if he was fucking one girl or three, which I'm quite sure he is actually, he would always be ready for sex."

"So we've determined I'm not Malfoy," Harry said, realizing his reticence had given him away. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I want to know who you are," Pansy demanded.

"I can't tell you," Harry said, his voice soft and just a little threatening. "But I can tell you that if you don't drop your wand, I will have to take it forcibly."

Pansy held great stock in her own abilities, and she refused. "I'm not doing anything of the sort."

"Creperum Conturbo," Harry called out.

Pansy was hit with a blackness that seemed to come out of nowhere. But that was not the worst thing for her, for as hard as she tried, she could not remember where she was or what she was doing. She gave a tiny cry as her wand was ripped out of her hand. Suddenly it was all over, and the blonde boy, who she knew could not be Draco, was standing with her wand in his hand.

Harry slipped the wand into his holster. "I did warn you."

Pansy was now rather frightened. "Who the hell are you?"

"I give you my word that I mean you no harm," Harry offered up.

Pansy knew for sure then a little more about Harry. "Well, you're definitely no Slytherin. A Slytherin would have never have made a promise like that."

Harry admitted that Pansy's assumption was correct. "A Slytherin is the last thing I'd want to be." He looked thoughtfully at Pansy. "So what else should I know as a bogus Slytherin?" Harry was surprised when Pansy laughed at him. "What's so funny?"

"This whole situation is," Pansy said, shaking her head in disbelief, her dark hair flying around her face. "You obviously have no idea what you're doing. I worked out that you weren't Malfoy with a few minutes. I think you've chosen the worst person you could find to impersonate."

"I had little choice in the matter," Harry said tersely. "So after you've given me a little background on Slytherin, I'll have to decide what to do with you."

Pansy backed up until she hit a wardrobe. "You said you wouldn't hurt me."

"And I won't," Harry repeated. "But I can't let you leave this room knowing what you know."

"I do know that you won't last five minutes," Pansy declared, showing more bravado than she was actually feeling as she tried to work out if she could make it out of the room without Harry hitting her with a spell. She decided not.

"You'd be surprised," Harry countered, although he suspected that she might be right, given how quickly she had worked out that he was not Draco.

Keeping up the brave front, Pansy challenged him. "Tell me what happens when you're called before the Dark Lord in the Great Hall."

"I can't," Harry admitted as he sat back down on the bed.

"I could help you with your problem," Pansy offered, more than a little scared as to what the alternative might be despite Harry's reassurances about her safety. "I know what the situation is here and I know Malfoy better than most, I could guide you."

Harry was aware that she had a point. "Why should I trust you?"

"Because no-one else in Slytherin will help you," Pansy quite rightly said.

Harry did not know why he believed her but he just knew there was more to it than that. "That doesn't really answer my question."

"Let's be blunt," Pansy responded, realizing that she could perhaps maneuver the situation to ensure her safety. "You need my help and you're not going to get it anywhere else. So you can either obliviate me and flounder, and I have no doubt the Dark Lord will work out that you're not Malfoy, as will most of Slytherin, or you can let me help you."

"But you have no idea who I am," Harry pointed out.

"It's obvious you're on the side of the Light," Pansy told him, before going on to prove that she was cleverer than Harry would have

given her credit for. "And that maybe you're even one of Potter's friends, wanting to get revenge for his death."

Harry's mouth went taut as he thought about Susan and how close he himself had come to dying. "Did you know about the plan to kill the Muggle-borns?"

Pansy had had no idea. "I might be Draco's girlfriend, but he tells me nothing, and so I didn't know about the attack. If you were there, you would have noticed that I wasn't one of the students who moved to hold others hostage."

Harry had seen Hermione's memory of the event, and he therefore knew each and every one of the students that had betrayed them. However, he was still unsure about Pansy. "Fair enough but I'll be honest and tell you that I have my doubts about you. You may not have moved that day but you also did nothing to help any of the students."

"I'd have died if I had," Pansy said. "You saw what happened to Flitwick."

Harry had to admit that she had a point. "Fine, but don't think that I'm not holding it against you about what happened, because I am."

Pansy believed then that Harry was indeed one of his friends. "So you are one of Potter's friends."

"It doesn't matter who I am, what matters right now is your true allegiance," Harry said, still having serious doubts about Pansy's honesty. "Why are you so willing to help me?"

"I'm hoping that you'll help bring down the Dark Lord," Pansy answered honestly, her voice shaking as she knew she'd be signing her death warrant if she had chosen to put her trust in the wrong person. "I know Potter is dead but if there's still some hope then I want to help." She then decided to be a little more aggressive. "Look, whoever you are, I can make your life a lot easier for you if you'd just let me help. I don't expect you to trust me, but it still doesn't change that you really do need me. If you don't think you do, then just bloody well obliviate me and have done with it."

Harry debated his options and he came to the conclusion that Pansy was right. What little information they had been able to glean from Draco and Narcissa combined had been meager at best, and he had expected to be winging it, so Pansy's help would be invaluable. "Okay then."

Pansy held out her hand. "May I have my wand back?"

Harry removed her wand from his holster and threw it across to her, keeping his own wand still trained on her. "I want an oath that none of what we have just discussed will ever be discussed with anyone else unless I give you permission so to do, nor will you write it down, nor will you give anyone any type of sign that I'm not who I say I am."

Pansy did everything Harry asked, before going further. "...and I also swear that I didn't know anything about the plan to kill the Muggle-borns, that I will do anything I can to help the Light, even if means helping Potter's friends, and that I will never attempt to harm you."

Harry had not expected this, but satisfied he lowered his wand. "So, what do I need to know?"

Pansy looked him up and down. "We first need to ensure that you have a good supply of polyjuice."

"I don't need it," Harry said, before explaining briefly what he was not doing. "And before you ask, no, I'm not wearing a glamour. My disguise will remain intact no matter what happens."

Pansy again proved she was far from stupid with her next comment. "So no polyjuice or glamour, which means that either you've somehow body swapped with Malfoy..."

"That's just disgusting," Harry interrupted.

"So a no then," Pansy said, before going on. "Or you have some sort of long-term spell or charm on you."

"I do," Harry admitted, deciding it couldn't hurt to tell her as she was under oath. "I'm wearing a ring that locks in my current appearance."

"Then let's test it out. I think we should call for a little sustenance before we get down to business," Pansy decided, wanting to check exactly how good Harry's disguise was. "Call out 'Robirch'."

Harry did as she said. "Robirch."

A quivering house-elf that would not meet Harry's eyes appeared, and it bowed low, its nose grazing the floor as it did so. "Master Draco."

"I require..." Harry looked at Pansy, as he was unaware of what Draco would choose. "I think this should be the lady's choice."

"Bring red and white wine, cheese, French bread, pate, chocolate and some cherries," Pansy demanded in an imperious voice.

The house-elf vanished and Harry raised an eyebrow. "White wine?"

"First lesson," Pansy said as she started to prepare a makeshift dining area on the bed. "Malfoy likes his alcohol. He drinks in front of his parents and his so-called friends. So get used to it."

Robirch reappeared, an open weave basket in one hand and what had to be a picnic basket in the other. "Master Draco, Sir."

Harry took the items from the house-elf and was about to say thank you when he realized that this was something Draco would definitely not do. "Get out."

The house-elf bowed low and vanished.

Pansy nodded approvingly. "You've already picked up lesson two, and Robirch didn't see through your disguise, which means that it's also going to hopefully fool the Dark Lord."

Harry brought up the identity of the supposed Dark Lord. "Are you sure he's actually Voldemort?"

Pansy shivered at Harry's use of 'Voldemort'. "Yes, why?"

"I'm not sure he is," Harry revealed. "But even if he isn't, he's as dangerous as Voldemort."

Pansy tried to suppress yet another shudder and failed. "I'm afraid you're going to have to get used to calling him the Dark Lord, even if you don't think he is Lord Voldemort."

"I will if you'll try call him 'Voldemort' in private," Harry bargained, not about to call the man 'the Dark Lord' when he didn't have to.

"Agreed." Pansy then began to help get out the food.

Harry helped her, before taking a reluctant sip of the white wine when Pansy told him he should, and grimacing. "Malfoy really likes this stuff?"

"Yes," Pansy said, taking a refined sip of her own. "Or, if you don't like the white, try the red."

Harry vanished the white wine before pouring out the red. He was surprised at how different it tasted. "This is much better. What is it?"

Pansy looked at the bottle. "A Merlot – Draco only likes Merlot and Shiraz, so remember that. I'll also provide you with a list of foods and beverages that Draco doesn't like."

After taking another appreciative sip, Harry put the glass aside. "Food and drink aside, I need a little background on Malfoy's friends."

"Crabbe and Goyle are supposedly his friends but they're more like his muscle than anything else," Pansy responded, ticking off who she could think off. "He and Blaise are at odds because both of them want to be top dog, but Blaise has been losing that battle ever since the Weasel helped Lupin escape. Blaise is only dating Gabriella Lewis, a Ravenclaw, because no-one in Slytherin will go out with him after the Weasel's debacle. And you should know that Draco has just screwed Lewis, which will make things between him and Blaise even less harmonious."

"And I guess from your earlier comment that Malfoy is sleeping with Greengrass," Harry said.

Pansy pulled a face. "In more ways than one. He's sleeping with Daphne and her younger sister, and sometimes together."

Harry was disgusted as Pansy revealed something he didn't know. "What kind of a person is Malfoy?"

"Immoral and spoilt," Pansy came back. "His father pretends to discipline Draco when they are out together in public but behind closed doors Lucius encourages his son to do as he wants. Lucius and Draco both treat Narcissa like dirt."

Harry found himself feeling sorry for the woman. "Anything else you can tell me?"

Pansy nodded. "Blaise is my friend, but he is definitely not on your side."

"Noted," Harry said, before asking, "What else do you know about the Dark Lord?"

"Not much but as far as I know, Lucius is part of his Inner Circle."

"As is Snape, I know." What Harry didn't know though was who else was a part of it. "Do you know of anyone else in it?"

"My mother, and I think Blaise's mother, Arabella, but I'm not sure about her."

Harry thought about what Pansy had revealed. "It makes sense I suppose with Zabini and Malfoy vying to be the new prince of Slytherin once Capshore leaves, although with Ginny's stunt I can't see Zabini getting much support." Thinking about who was in Slytherin, brought Harry around to what he had been wondering earlier. "I noticed Capshore and his cronies were in the common room, as were a lot of other Slytherins. What happened to lessons?"

"They happen but there are fewer classes to take," Pansy said, her voice dropping. "The Dark Lord executed Burbage and Trelawney, saying that they were not needed to teach anymore."

Harry was horrified. "When?"

"Two days ago." Pansy shivered. "We were all called into the Great Hall. He had suspended both Burbage and Trelawney above the floor in some sort of bubble prison. They were both kicking and

screaming, trying to get out. Trelawney begged Snape to help them but he just stood by and laughed."

"Figures," Harry said in a voice filled with hatred. "Go on."

"The Dark Lord let them down one by one and tortured them until they were barely recognizable as human, and then he killed them, before feeding Burbage to his snake," Pansy could feel bile rising in her throat as she thought about what she had witnessed.

"Snake?" Harry asked, wondering if it could possibly be Nagini.

"A big green snake that he spoke to in Parseltongue," Pansy said. "I think it's called Nagini, like Potter's snake was."

"I think it is his snake," Harry decided. "At least it's obvious where it went after it bit Hagrid." Mentioning Hagrid made Harry fear the worst, especially as Ginny hadn't known about the gentle giant's fate. "Have you seen Hagrid?"

"He was alive the last time I saw him," Pansy revealed. "He was supposed to face off against Lupin in a big fight or something like that. But then the Weasel helped Lupin escaped, and Hagrid ended up being pitted against a different werewolf. Hagrid won, although I do know he was bitten."

Harry was now faced with the worrying possibility of a giant werewolf, but aware he could do little by worrying about it, Harry asked about the attack on the school instead. "Obviously I'm not aware of what happened after the school was attacked. Can you tell me?"

So Pansy told him everything she knew. "Somehow Potter and his friends escaped, and it was announced that no matter, Potter and Bones would be dead within a few days." She glanced at Harry. "But I suspect you already know that."

"I do," Harry said, anger rising up inside of him again as he recalled Susan and her fate.

Pansy could see that Harry was angry. "I'm sorry about your friends."

"Thank you," Harry said, accepting Pansy's condolences. He then noticed that Pansy was staring at him. "What is it?"

"I'm trying to figure out who you are. I pretty sure you can't be a girl, so if you're one of Potter's friends who escaped that would leave McMillan, Finch-Fletchley, Longbottom and Weasley."

Harry was interested to see who she thought he was. "So who am I?"

Pansy's first observation reflected Harry's own comment about Ron. "Weasley hates Slytherins and he'd never be able to pull this off without giving himself away, so we can rule him out, and McMillan is something of a wimp. And whoever took Draco's place would have to be able to fly well, so that rules out Longbottom."

Harry was surprised. "Quidditch is still taking place?"

"Yes," Pansy said, noting that Harry was shocked. "It's school as normal as much as possible as far as that is concerned. So if you are who I think you are, you're going to have to play your old house and beat them, because if you don't you'll be punished."

"So you think I'm Justin?" Harry asked, aware he would have come to the same conclusion as Pansy.

"Yes," Pansy said firmly. "I do believe you are. And I think that's why you're letting me help you."

Harry was glad that Justin had told him about his and Pansy's chats. "Because of our library encounters?"

"Yes," Pansy said, now truly believing that it was definitely Justin in front of her.

Harry moved swiftly on, letting Pansy run with her belief of who he was. "Now you've worked out who I am, I think we should get back to what I need to know. As I'm in Slytherin house, I need to know how I should act around Snape."

"In private you'll call him Uncle Severus, and no matter what you do, as long as you don't make him suspicious, it will be fine," Pansy told Harry, aware that Draco rarely could do wrong as far as the potions

master was concerned. "But I have no idea how Draco acts around Lewis as I've never been witness to their interactions, but I guess it must be fairly warmly as Draco has just screwed her."

Harry grimaced. "Not a nice thought." He also knew he would have to do something about the Greengrass sisters. "So what do you suggest about Daphne and her sister?"

"Well, you could keep up appearances," Pansy started, only to stop as Harry almost turned green. "Okay, then you'll have to dump Daphne and do it publicly. Malfoy would humiliate her and so you're going to have to as well to be realistic."

"I think I can do that," Harry said, although it was not something to which he was looking forward.

"You've got to be less hesitant, Jus..." Pansy herself then hesitated, before saying, "Actually, you need to get used to be calling by Draco's name, even in private by me."

Harry thought about it. "To be truthful, the thought of being called Draco by you when you know I'm not him is going to be wearing."

"How about Dray then?" Pansy suggested. "Malfoy hated it."

This sat a little better with Harry. "Dray will be fine. So what else have you to tell me?"

Pansy took a bite of cheese, before surprising Harry. "Well, I should tell you that I'm going to be staying in your room tonight, Dray."

"I have no intention of having sex with you." Harry thought he should make it completely clear.

Pansy made it equally clear that she felt the same way. "And I don't want to have sex with you either. As mean as it sounds, I'm afraid you don't do it for me."

Harry could not help but be curious. "Do you mean as Dray or Justin?"

"Both," Pansy said firmly, although she was lying. "I prefer my men a little older."

Now Harry had a chance to tease the girl. "So Snape is more your style?"

Pansy scowled at Harry. "That's disgusting."

"So who is?" Harry asked. "I think that as your current boyfriend I should at least know."

Pansy stuck out her tongue at him, but she went a pretty shade of pink as she answered him, mentioning someone else she had had quite a crush on. "I liked George Weasley if you must know."

Harry was more than a little astounded. "But his whole family are considered blood traitors."

"I still liked him, and I know it had to have been him and his brother who pulled those tricks on Draco, which makes him even more attractive," Pansy admitted. "Or at least it did."

"He's still alive, although he's no longer in the country," Harry revealed. "He's the one who rescued us, together with McMillan, who you consider to be a wimp."

"How?"

Harry passed on what had happened. "Obviously now that Snape has changed the warding, there's no way we can use that exit route again."

"So at least some of you were saved," Pansy noted before moving on. "How did Lupin and Weasley get out?"

"I'm not going to tell you that yet," Harry said, not about to reveal what might be a viable way in and out of Hogwarts. "Sorry."

Pansy shrugged. "While I can't tell anyone anything about you, you don't trust me not to mess up a possible way out of here in an emergency, do you?"

Harry shook his head. "Sorry, but I don't."

"That's fair enough, I'd react in the same way," Pansy admitted. "And you were at least honest about how you and Potter's friends got out."

"So can we get back to what you have to tell me?" Harry asked, before frowning. "I guess that whatever you have to tell me is going to take a long time, hence your stay here overnight, but won't you get into trouble?"

Pansy picked up a cherry. "It's one of Draco's perks, and people are used to me spending the night in here, so no-one will think it strange."

Harry also helped himself to some food. "Fire away then..."

Potter Place – June 8th 1997

Hermione jumped out of her skin as Harry apparated in almost on top of her, before she threw herself at him. "We've been so worried."

Harry immediately apologized. "Sorry, but this is the first real chance I've had to leave after Hogsmeade was locked down after that skirmish. Pansy is covering for me."

Hermione was unable to tamp down the jealousy that rose up in her. "Parkinson?"

"Yes," Harry said, before he realized how Hermione had interpreted his comment. "I'll explain about her in a moment. Where is everyone?"

"Kitchen, it's lunchtime," Hermione reminded him.

Remus had heard the conversation but had decided to wait for the couple to come in, before hugging him. "Harry, welcome back."

"I've only got about twenty minutes and so I'd better get straight down to business," Harry said as he sat down and smiled at the friendly faces he had missed. "First things first, you should know that Burbage and Trelawney are dead. Somehow the Dark Lord, as he's apparently known, got hold of Nagini and she ate them, well she ate Burbage."

Everyone was shocked and dismayed to hear this. Remus shook his head. "How on earth could she have ended up in his hands?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know, but after overhearing them talking, she's loyal to him and doesn't mind carrying out his orders."

"What about the other teachers?" Sirius asked, although he had no idea who they might be.

Harry grimaced. "Most of the classes are being taught by Death Eaters. Snape is Headmaster now but still takes potions. Zabini's mother is teaching the Dark Arts and Pansy's mother is teaching us Charms."

"Why are you calling her Pansy?" Ron interjected.

"She's helping me," Harry said and waited for the explosion.

Ron looked incredulously at Harry. "Are you insane?"

Harry gave him the lowdown on what had happened. "I'd have been lost without her, Ron. And although her mother is a Death Eater and believed to be part of our wannabe's Inner Circle, Pansy has sworn to fight on our side, as her father, although her mother doesn't know it."

Ron subsided. "Are there any former teachers left alive?"

Harry nodded. "Snape, obviously, Sinistra, Sprout and Vector. And apparently Hagrid is still alive, although I'm rather worried he's likely now a werewolf." He then explained about the fight Hagrid had been forced to undergo.

"What about Professor Gotobed?" Hermione asked, thinking about one of her favorite teachers.

"She's working at the Three Broomsticks," Remus said, realizing he had somehow forgotten to mention her before Harry had left for Hogwarts. "She's a barmaid and provides 'entertainment'."

Harry could see that everyone understood what Remus meant. "I've seen her there, and according to Pansy, she defended the

Gryffindor students Remus was supposed to have executed on the full moon, so our wannabe gave her a new position."

"So who teaches Transfiguration now?" Remus asked, not wanting to dwell on the young woman's fate.

"Snape," Harry said, his face revealing how much he now hated Transfiguration. "But the first to fourth years are taught by the Head Boy and Girl."

"How tight is the security?" Padma asked, thinking over what she might be able to come up with to help Harry in a fight. She had taken over George's role in trying to create new spells, but unfortunately she was far from his level of brilliance when it came to ingenuity.

"Tight," Harry said in a terse voice. "You need a password to get into the school as well as having a Dark Mark. The password is rotated periodically."

"How did you get in?" Luna asked, well aware that Harry wouldn't have known the password.

"I got very lucky."

"What are our chances of getting the pupils out?"

"Slim to none – the place is warded to the teeth," Harry said, before recalling the strange ward he had encountered on his way in. "And speaking of wards, there's a ward that surrounds the school that feels like an electric shock and cold water all at once."

Remus was stumped. "I've never heard of such a ward."

"I have," Sirius broke in, being familiar with it. "It's an old Dark Magic ward and it's part of the Black Family Lexicon of Spells."

"He probably used your blood," Remus said, before reminding Sirius of the curse he still carried. "He'd have needed it to use the Imperius Potion."

"Then if we need to bring it down, it will take my blood to do so as whoever supplied the blood has to again supply it to deactivate the ward."

"I do know that the standard wards don't stretch to the bottom of the lake," Remus offered up, before dismissing his observation. "But we can't use that way to get everyone out; it's too slow and cold for a normal person to make it."

Parvati shivered at the thought and asked about the Ministry. "Do you know anything more about the Ministry?"

Harry nodded. "A lot of the workers from the Ministry have been shifted to Azkaban, but I don't know who, but I do know that it's everyone who refused to serve our wannabe."

Padma paled. "My father will be in Azkaban then."

"As will Mum and Fred probably and Dad definitely is," Ron said glumly. "I wish they hadn't been meeting Dad that day."

Remus then asked about some others of who he needed to know the whereabouts. "And the Aurors who attacked Hogsmeade?"

Harry shook his head. The small band of Aurors had come out of nowhere the previous week and attacked without warning. "They were executed in Hogwarts."

"We could have used them," Remus said dismally. "I've still not managed to track down any other Aurors. Either they're all dead or they've gone to ground, as that group did."

"Well if you do come across any, then ensure they use their brains and keep hidden, at least for now," Harry warned. "Our wannabe was rather brutal before he executed them."

This made Hermione worry. "Harry, are you're sure you should go back?"

Harry nodded. "I'm our one link right now."

Ernie had a question. "What happened to the pupils that Remus should have killed?"

"Greyback was used to kill them in his stead," Harry told him. "However, unlike Remus, he's a seriously nasty piece of work,

whether it's a full moon or not. He apparently likes young girls and our wannabe had to make an example of him for forcing his attentions on a fifth year. Greyback though didn't seem to care; it was almost as if he enjoyed the pain. It was disgusting."

"Keep out of his way, Harry," Remus warned, his brow furrowing. "He'll be able to detect your emotions."

"I've only ever seen him in a group setting when he was being punished," Harry said. "He doesn't really bother the Slytherins, as from what I've heard, it's just the other houses, and more particularly the girls."

Cordelia gave a shudder. "You said he was punished. Is that why he was used to kill the pupils?"

"I don't think so," Harry said, squeezing Hermione's hand as he felt her shiver. "And before you ask, I couldn't help them. They weren't in the same room you were held in."

"You checked?" Remus asked in horror.

Harry nodded. "Of course I did. I wasn't going to sit by and let them kill three students if I could help it."

"Who was it?" Ron asked, the strain showing on his face.

"Craig Mulroney, Devon MacGregor and Nicholas Vesey."

Remus could feel Harry's concern. "Harry, I know this is upsetting, but under no circumstances are you to risk your life to save anyone else who might end up falling foul of our wannabe. This is strictly a recon mission for you."

"As I've already said, I don't know where the prisoners are now being kept," Harry responded before checking the time. "I know I said twenty minutes but I really should go."

After bidding goodbye to all those in the kitchen, Harry led Hermione into the hallway. "How are you?"

"Worried sick and missing you," Hermione answered, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Harry, Remus is right about not risking your life, so promise me you won't."

Harry stroked Hermione's hair back from her face. "I promise. School is almost over anyway. Another four weeks and I'll be back here with you. I can't risk taking Malfoy's place at Malfoy Manor, not even with Narcissa there."

"I'm glad you can't go there," Hermione said and she tilted her head up. "I wish you could stay."

"So do I," Harry said, as he lowered his head and kissed Hermione. Almost breathless by the time it was over, it was hard for Harry to let go. "I love you."

"And I love you," Hermione said, feeling tearful as Harry let go of her hand and vanished.

Hermione wandered back into the kitchen to discover Remus discussing Harry with the others. After listening she agreed with Remus' assessment. "You're right – he does seem different. I'm not sure if it's because he's in Slytherin now or..."

Justin interrupted her. "He's been different since he recovered from being poisoned. It's as if he's hardened up. He's certainly not the same person I was eating sweets with at Easter."

Luna had another theory. "Do you think doing Dark Magic at school is affecting him?"

Remus shook his head. "He's not been there long enough."

Entering Hogwarts, Harry had no idea he was being discussed, but even he would have been the first to admit that he had changed. But as far as he was concerned, it was for the better.

Next Chapter: A prodigal returns; Remus gets bad news; Harry and Draco are both punished.

Chapter 58: A Painful Example

June 14th 1997

Hogwarts

Harry rubbed his head, his sleep interrupted yet again by another nightmare, this time one about him torturing Remus. Groaning, he rolled off the bed and called out for Robirch.

The house-elf appeared, bowing low as it greeted Harry. "Master Draco, Sir."

"Get me a glass of warm milk," Harry barked out. He hated that he had to be so rude to the hardworking house-elf but keeping up appearances was paramount. Harry took the glass of warm milk without a thank you and the house-elf left. As he drank the milk, Harry decided to speak to Remus in the morning, as thankfully it was the weekend.

Potter Place

Hermione was delighted to see Harry, and the moment he tapped his ring to look like himself, she threw herself at him. "I've missed you."

Harry took his time in kissing Hermione, before he finally let her go. "I've missed you as well." He whispered quietly in her ear, "Please tell me that by some miracle everyone is out."

Hermione blushed as she guessed what Harry was hoping for, particularly as she could feel how much he wanted her. "Sorry."

Harry sighed. "It was worth a try."

"Can you stay overnight?" Hermione asked hopefully.

Harry shook his head. "While Slytherins have a great deal of leeway, we still don't have that much."

"It grieves me to hear that from you," Neville's voice interrupted.

"Neville?" Harry looked over Hermione's shoulder and he grinned at the young man. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you."

A very sun-tanned Neville strode forward and took Hermione's place in holding Harry. "I'm sorry I left."

"You were upset." Harry hugged Neville back as firmly as he was hugging him.

Both young men had tears in their eyes as they parted. "It's so good to see you."

"Likewise," Harry admitted. "Where have you been and what have you been doing to look that good?"

"I ended up in California," Neville said as they walked down the corridor towards the kitchen. "I managed to find some work, even though I didn't need to do it, and I just toiled mindlessly so that I didn't have to think about things. It was actually the workers at the orange picking plant who helped me to realize that I was hiding away from my responsibilities. They all worked together as a family, and I realized that by leaving I'd forsaken mine, so I tried to catch a flight home."

"And nearly got arrested," Cordelia said, catching the end of the conversation.

It was obvious to Harry that Cordelia looked much happier now that the young man was back, as she tended to mother everyone and worried about them all incessantly. "Arrested?"

"I've been red flagged apparently for mysteriously vanishing from a flight from the UK to New York," Neville informed Harry, grinning. "So I did a runner, before using an invisibility spell to get on board a flight back home."

"I'm just glad that you're okay," Harry said, feeling relieved at his friend's re-emergence.

Neville then glanced at Cordelia and Hermione. "Do you two mind if I talk to Harry alone?"

Cordelia suspected she knew what Neville was going to talk about. "We'll go into the drawing room."

Harry turned to face Neville. "What's wrong?"

"I want to apologize, Harry," Neville said, taking a moment before going on. "I've spent most of my life envying you because of who you are and, to be honest, blaming you because I've never been the person I wanted to be. It was only when I started going out with Susan that I began to change that opinion and I began to change how I feel about you. When Susan died..."

Harry placed a hand on Neville's shoulder as the young man choked up. "Neville, I'm sorry that Susan had to die because of me."

Neville coughed to clear his throat. "Harry, I think Susan died because of who her aunt was and not because of you. And I'm pretty sure that your pretender would have still killed the Muggle-borns no matter what, so don't blame yourself. I don't blame you."

Harry became as choked up as Neville had gotten. "Thank you."

Neville, however, wasn't finished. "I've already apologized to Justin and Ron about what I'm about to tell you but I was the one who told McGonagall about the dragon."

Harry had almost forgotten about the incident. "Neville, it's water under the bridge." He then also decided to be honest. "And you should know that I've never trusted you. I told the others about things that I deliberately kept from you."

"I probably deserved it," Neville said, before holding out his hand. "Can we put this behind us?"

"We already have," Harry said, shaking Neville's hand. "Come on, let's go and see the others."

"They're not in," Neville said. "Everyone else has gone out to Muggle London. They were all going mad being stuck in, so Remus and Sirius took them out to see a movie and for dinner. Cordelia didn't want to go, and neither did Hermione, so I offered to stay behind."

Cordelia handed over a tin of cookies she had baked, and she urged Harry and Neville to help themselves. "I know Remus will be disappointed to have missed you."

"I only really dropped by because I wanted the Marauders Map," Harry said, taking a cookie. "I forgot it last time, and I can at least make a list of everyone in Hogwarts if I take it with me."

Hermione left the room and returned with the Map. "We've not been able to tell anything from it. It's still frozen."

Harry examined the Map. "I have the strange feeling that this will show the real me once I get it back into Hogwarts."

"Then be careful with it," Cordelia warned. "In the meantime, I think we should sit and talk for a while seeing as your last visit was brief and I have some news I want to share."

Harry hazarded a guess. "Don't tell me, Lester asked you to marry him and you said yes."

Cordelia threw a tea towel at Harry and said, "Actually your guardian did and I said yes."

Harry's jaw hit his chin in shock until he noticed that Hermione was trying hard not to laugh. "You're joking, aren't you?"

"I am," Cordelia said, and she held out her left hand to show off a ring inset with a large sapphire surrounded by diamonds. "Lester was here two days ago and asked me then, and I said yes. He wants me join him after you leave Hogwarts and can attend our marriage. But I'm not sure if I should leave you all."

"I think you should," Harry said. "I have a bad feeling that things might get worse here and if you can't do magic, you'd be safer being further away."

"Harry, that doesn't inspire me to move," Cordelia said in a frustrated voice.

"What does Justin think?" Harry asked.

"He wants me to go," Cordelia admitted.

"Then you should go," Harry said, glad that his best friend had said the same. "And congratulations."

Harry then spent the next twenty minutes chatting, mostly about Neville and his experiences and Cordelia and her forthcoming wedding, until he glanced at the kitchen clock and noticed the time. "I'm afraid I have to go as I don't want to arouse suspicion or cause problems for Pansy."

"That was a shocker learning about Parkinson," Neville said, as this was the first time her name had come up since Harry's arrival.

"She's been my lifeline," Harry said truthfully as he headed towards the hallway. "And I'll tell you more about it when I have more time. Right now though, I want a few minutes with my girlfriend before I have to go."

One week later

Harry fished the Marauders Map out of his pocket and handed it to Remus. "It's frozen again."

Remus wasn't bothered, his main interest in discovering who might be in Hogwarts. "No indication of who our wannabe might be?" All at once Remus stiffened. "No!"

Harry glanced at the Map but he had no idea what had upset Remus. "What's wrong?"

"My partner is here," Remus said in a worried voice.

"Can you tell me who he is?" Harry asked, as he again stared at the Map and the myriad of names on there. He knew that the Unspeakable that Remus usually worked with was named Altus but he had no idea of his real name.

Remus shook his head. "No."

"But I'm guessing he has to be a prisoner," Hermione said, although Remus didn't respond to her comment.

Hermione's observation narrowed it down for Harry, and he looked at the four names that were in the holding cell area on the seventh floor that Harry had discovered was being used for prisoners and which was heavily guarded. "I know he obviously isn't Tamara Cushion, nor is he William Holder and James Soft, as they're both first year pupils who got caught trying to run away. They've been locked up for three days without food as a punishment."

"They're not being tortured?" Justin asked.

Harry shook his head. "Pansy explained the system to me. It's all age and crime dependent, and being homesick and wanting to leave isn't a serious crime."

"Being an Unspeakable is," Remus said worriedly. "Altus and this Tamara must have gotten caught trying to get in to see what was happening."

"I'm surprised they tried," Harry said, having seen the extent of the security from the air when practicing with the Slytherin quidditch team. "There are Death Eaters and wards everywhere. I'm sorry but I can't help either of them."

"And neither of them would expect you to," Remus told Harry, and he expanded on his response. "So please, no heroics. You are our only link to this place and as much as I hate you being there, I need you."

"I know," Harry acknowledged, and he asked about the boy whose place he had taken. "How are things with Malfoy?"

Remus grimaced. "He's a pain in the neck. We're treating him well but he's wrecked his room three times now. The last time he did it, I'd had enough and punished him for it – nothing serious, just a spanking spell. I think it shocked him as the room has remained intact since then. Then again, I also warned him that I'd upgrade my response each time he caused more damage."

Harry held out his hand. "He's not alone in being punished."

Hermione was horrified to see six red stripes. "What happened?"

"I didn't get every answer right in a quiz in charms," Harry explained, and he then held out his other hand to show another five stripes. "I was eleven percent short, so I received eleven strikes of a cane."

"That's barbaric!" Justin exclaimed.

"It's Snape's ruling," Harry said as he moved his hands away. "He expects the Upper School to excel in everything. I have to leave my hands for a day before I can heal them, so my hands will be as good as new by tonight."

"I'm surprised that Snape..." then Remus' voice trailed off and he shook his head. "No, I shouldn't be. He'd want his own house to excel, to be the best, and so I imagine he'd be harder on Slytherin than anyone else."

Harry nodded. "You've got it in one. We're playing Hufflepuff tomorrow afternoon, and even though he's my... well, Malfoy's, godfather, I'm still expected to beat them. If I don't, then I'll be punished along with the rest of the team."

Hermione looked fearfully at Harry. "How?"

"We'll be the guinea pigs for Cruciatus practice," Harry said with distaste.

"Guinea pigs?" Cordelia's voice trembled with anger. "They use a curse like that on children?"

"Fifth years upward," Harry told her. "And if you refuse or fail at casting the curse, or any other curse you're supposed to be learning for that matter, then you become the guinea pig."

"You've not been a guinea pig though, have you?" Hermione asked hesitantly, almost afraid to hear the answer.

Harry shook his head. "I have no problem casting the curse. I just think about Snape and it comes easily, plus Pansy's lessons in Dark Arts spells have been invaluable. I'd have been in serious trouble without them, since Malfoy is well versed in quite a few of them as it turns out."

Neville glanced at Harry. "I was shocked when Remus told me the truth about you. I wish I'd known."

"Nobody knew," Harry said. "That's the point of being an Unspeakable, although I don't imagine anyone foresaw this scenario."

Remus gave a wry smile. "I certainly didn't."

The six of them turned at the sound of a crack. Remus rose up from the table. "Narcissa, is everything okay?"

Narcissa smiled pleasantly. "Yes, I just wanted to check on Draco."

"You know where his room is."

When she came back down, she looked far from happy. "You spanked him?"

"He deserved it," Remus said, able to feel how annoyed Narcissa was. "He was warned twice about wrecking his room, and I'd had enough by the third instance."

"It still doesn't give you the right..."

Harry interrupted the blonde. "He's getting off a lot lighter than I am." Harry showed her his hands and explained what he had gone through. "Just be grateful he's not a Hogwarts for the quidditch match tomorrow. If we don't win, the team is going to be used as target practice."

Narcissa simmered down, and she took a seat when invited to do so by Cordelia. "That's another reason why I dropped by. I was hoping Harry would be here. I wanted to warn you that Lucius will be attending to watch the match, and I have no doubt he'll wish to speak to you afterwards."

"Pansy has been drilling me in how to act," Harry told Narcissa. "So don't get worrying. I shouldn't give anything away."

Narcissa visibly relaxed. "I wish she and Draco could have gotten truly along."

"She wants nothing to do with your son," Harry said, this being the first chance he had had to speak to Narcissa since his departure for Hogwarts. "In fact she hates his guts."

"I'm well aware they don't get along, but don't you think that's a little strong?" Narcissa asked.

Harry shook his head. "No, and I'll be honest, if Draco was dying, I wouldn't do a thing to help the little shit."

Narcissa was not surprised by Harry's stance but she was taken aback by his vehemence. "I know that you blame Draco for what happened to your friends, but Draco has been influenced by Lucius."

"And so does Lucius include rape in his lexicon?" Harry asked bluntly, completely unaware that Lucius did.

Remus could feel Harry's anger and disgust. "Draco raped someone?"

Harry nodded. "Pansy Parkinson when she refused him."

Narcissa shook her head in denial. "I don't believe you."

"She swore an oath that she was telling the truth," Harry said, wanting Narcissa to understand the enormity of her son's depravity. "And to top it off, Draco was not only sleeping with Greengrass on the side but her sister as well."

Noticing how mortified Narcissa looked, Cordelia stood up and made an offer to the upset woman. "Narcissa, perhaps I should show you where the powder room is."

Shaking, Narcissa let Cordelia lead her away. A few moments later, when Cordelia returned, she turned on Harry.

"That was rather brutal, Harry."

"No more brutal than what her precious son did," Harry responded, unwilling to back down. "And I could have said more; Malfoy doesn't exactly believe in keeping his hands to himself if Pansy defies him. She's had to have sex with him since she was fifteen. The first time when I was alone with her, she was completely blasé about the

whole thing and started to undress the moment we were alone. She's learnt to..." Harry saw how tense Hermione had gone. "I've never laid a finger on Pansy, Hermione. She's well aware I'm in love with someone but she doesn't know who I really am... she thinks I'm Justin."

Harry shut up when a pale but composed Narcissa returned and he got to his feet. "I apologize for telling you about Draco in the manner I did, but you needed to realize that your son is not the same son you have conjured up in your mind."

"I admit it isn't how I would have wished to have learnt the truth, but it's better that I do," Narcissa said in a trembling voice. "And I accept your apology." She then moved away from the subject. "How will you make the swap with Draco in time for the summer holidays?"

"Remus has the details," Harry said, having already gone over his idea with Remus. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I think I should get back."

July 6th 1997

Draco glanced over at the door, his voice full of sarcasm. "Mother, how kind of you to visit me."

"It's time to go home, Draco," Narcissa said in calm voice. "But first, we need an oath that you won't ever discuss what happened here with anyone. Then we're going to take the precaution of obliterating you."

"I won't make it," Draco refused, aware that his mother was unlikely to hurt him. "And you can't make me."

"I can," Harry said, stepping into the room. "I know what you've been doing to Pansy, and I think it's time someone took it out on you."

Draco gaped in shock, before shaking his head. "Nice try but I know that Potter's dead."

Narcissa denied it. "Harry survived the poisoning attempt, Draco. In fact he's the one who's been masquerading as you."

Draco still didn't believe her. "There's no way Potter survived the poison."

Harry turned his wand on himself. "I swear on my life and my magic that I am Harry James Potter. I also swear that if you don't swear the oath we've asked for, I'll take it out on you."

Draco was visibly stunned and even though Harry had sworn an oath, he rubbished Harry's words. "You haven't got it in you to hurt me, Hufflepuff."

"But I've been living as a Slytherin for almost two months," Harry reminded Draco. "And I've learnt such a lot, like how to cast the Cruciatus, how to cast a large number of rather disturbing Dark Arts spells and... how to kill."

"You need me alive," Draco came back, although his voice was less sure as his mother stood there and said nothing.

"True, so I'll resort to the Cruciatus unless you swear the oath Narcissa asked for," Harry said in a quiet but menacing voice.

"Mother, are you just going to stand there and let him do this?" Draco asked his mother, his contemptuous tone now filled with worry.

Narcissa gave Draco a disapproving look. "Yes, if you lie to me." She then advanced on her son. "Tell me, Draco, is it true you raped Pansy?"

Draco gave Harry a hate filled look. "She told you that and you just believed her?"

Harry nodded. "Yes."

"She's a liar and a whore," Draco responded, his words dripping with disdain.

"She's also someone who swore an oath to me this morning that she was telling the truth," Narcissa informed her son, wishing that Draco would have been brave enough to own up to the terrible thing he had done. "I defended you, Draco, and you're not worthy of that

defense." She glanced at Harry. "He's all yours." She then left the room.

Harry faced off against Draco. "The oath, Malfoy."

Draco shook his head. "No."

"Crucio!" Harry intoned quietly but with a good deal of force. After a few seconds, however, he let up. "The oath, Malfoy."

"Fuck you, Potter!" Draco screamed at Harry.

This time Harry didn't hold back as he cast the pain curse, and he stood impassively as Draco screamed, only stopping when the young man soiled himself. "The oath, Malfoy."

Weeping piteously, Draco held out his hand, the severity of the curse evident by his shaking. "Give me a wand."

"I'm not stupid," Harry said in a voice with sarcastic laughter. Moving forward he cleaned Draco up, froze him from the neck down and handed him a wand, placing it against Draco's heart. "Swear the oath like a good boy."

Still crying, Draco did as he was told. Only then did Harry call Remus in to obliviate him.

Salisbury Towers, Manchester

Narcissa stood over Draco, Remus in disguise beside her; Pansy's home was only accessible if you had a Dark Mark and Sirius didn't, so Remus was 'playing' healer.

"Draco, Draco, wake up."

Draco came to, blinking rapidly. "What?"

Remus filled him in. "You were visiting your girlfriend when you had a fall. Mrs. Malfoy requested that I take a look at you."

"What do you mean, visiting my girlfriend?" Draco asked as he looked around in complete bewilderment.

"You tripped over Moscow," Pansy said, mentioning her father's cat.
"Don't you remember?"

Draco stared at everyone in complete confusion. "What are you going on about?"

"What's the last thing you remember?" Remus asked.

"Who are you?"

"Healer West," Remus said. "Mrs. Malfoy requested my presence." He then pulled out his wand. "So what is the last thing you remember?"

Now a little worried, Draco answered Remus' question. "Um, walking to Hogsmeade with Zabini and his girlfriend."

"And the date?"

"What?"

"The date?"

Draco supplied the date and was duly informed he'd managed to forget two months of his life. "Two months!"

"You must have banged your head when you tripped," Pansy said in a soothing voice.

"Amnesia then," Remus said airily, before putting his wand away. "Your memory will probably soon return."

"And if it doesn't?"

"I suspect it will," Remus said, having no idea about amnesia whatsoever, and he suspected neither did Draco as he continued. "It's rare in cases like this that it doesn't."

"See, Draco, you should be back to normal before you know it," Narcissa said, before turning to Remus. "Thank you for your time."

"You're very welcome, Mrs. Malfoy, and you know where I am if you need to contact me," Remus said, and he then vanished.

The moment he did, Draco dismissed his mother. "I don't need you here, Mother. Pansy can tell me whatever I've missed."

"Perhaps you should come home with me," Narcissa suggested.

"I said I don't need you," Draco barked and he wobbled up onto his feet. "You've had me checked out. You can go now. If I need anything Robirch or Pansy can get it."

As a rather hurt Narcissa left, Draco grabbed Pansy's arm. "I think we should talk in your room. I want to know exactly what's happened."

Pansy reluctantly went with Draco into her bedroom.

Draco sat down and Pansy filled him in on the basics of the previous two months. She could see that he believed he had been the one to lead Slytherin to a victory in quidditch, when in reality it had been Harry. And Draco was also gratified to learn that his exam results had been even better than usual, again having no idea that it had been Harry's diligence that had provided them.

Then Pansy moved on to Daphne and her sister. "You dumped Greengrass, and her sister then refused to have anything to do with you."

"So who am I sleeping with?" Draco asked, not caring that he was posing the question to his girlfriend or that he had finished with Daphne.

"No-one that you've told me about," Pansy said. "And I know you must be getting it somewhere as you're not getting it from me."

Draco wondered who it might be. He had quite a thing for Cho Chang, and he wondered if it might be her. He felt himself harden at the thought of the Chinese girl and he decided that he may as well make use of Pansy. "But as I can't remember and you're here, I think it's time I did get it from you again. Take off your knickers."

"You've only just come round after an accident," Pansy pointed out, hoping to put Draco off.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "I know, and if I'm ready for it, I don't see why you can't be." When she didn't move, he snapped his fingers. "I mean now, not next week. Get on that bed."

Pansy refused. "No."

Draco backhanded her across the face, splitting her lip. "You're my property now, bitch, and you'll do as I say."

Because of her engagement contract, Pansy was unable to retaliate, and in tears, she did as Draco demanded, lying back on her bed. "Go on then." She winced as Draco pushed his fingers inside of her in a poor attempt to make her ready for him, before unzipping his trousers and pushing roughly into her. She was thankful that he didn't last long and he rolled off her.

"Crap as always."

Pansy was used to Draco's unkind remarks and she slowly rose up off the bed. "I'm going to shower."

His lust slaked, Draco shrugged. "I suppose I'll see you on my birthday."

"Your birthday has gone," Pansy reminded Draco.

"Whatever," Draco said dismissively and he vanished.

Pansy showered and changed her clothes before she disappeared.

It was Remus who greeted the girl, and despite the fact she had showered and had healed her lip, he could immediately detect Draco's scent on her. "I'm so sorry, Pansy. I can't believe Narcissa left you alone with him."

"He told her to get out and it would have seemed odd if she hadn't." Pansy then burst into tears. "I hate that bastard."

Remus gathered the girl into his arms, soothing her. "Cry it out."

When the tears ended, Justin passed her a glass of white wine. "I think you probably need this."

Pansy gratefully took it, taking several huge mouthfuls of the wine. "Thank you. I'm not surprised you don't need a drink as well after dealing with Malfoy."

Justin winced. "I'm afraid I have a confession. You see, it wasn't me who took Malfoy's place."

Pansy glanced over at Neville. "It was you?"

Harry stepped into the room, having listened to the conversation from the room next door. "No, it was me."

The wineglass slipped from Pansy's fingers in shock. "Potter?"

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you before now but I couldn't risk it," Harry said, sitting down on the stool next to Pansy.

Pansy was still staring at him as if she had seen a ghost. "How?"

Harry explained about his cufflinks. "...and although Justin wanted to do it, it ended up being me instead."

"I don't know whether to punch you or hex you," Pansy said, accepting a fresh glass of wine from Justin.

Harry reached out and grabbed her hand. "No matter what you decide to do, I want you to know that you have been amazing, Pansy."

"Then I think I'll forgo doing either." Pansy squeezed Harry's hand before letting go. She then told everyone what had happened. "Malfoy didn't seem to suspect anything. He was simply ecstatic that he thought he'd won at quidditch. And he was less than kind about Greengrass."

"Arrogant tosser," Ron remarked. "I wish I could kick the little bastard's head in."

"Ron!" Cordelia cautioned.

"Ron's right," Neville said vehemently. "He is a tosser and does deserve a kicking."

However, Pansy apologized. "I'm sorry for ranting but I hate everything Malfoy stands for, him and his Master."

"That's why we're all here," Harry said and squeezed Pansy's shoulder and he grinned. "And I can show you my memory of using the Cruciatus on him if it would make you feel better."

"It would," Pansy said softly, before she remembered what she had in her cloak pocket. "I almost forgot. This is for you."

Remus took the Map from Pansy, having agreed with her that she would activate it once the school was empty, since she had been visiting her mother the previous night. He glanced first at the area used for imprisonment and he let out a sound of regret. "It was too much to hope for that they would still be alive."

Harry had already told Remus that Tom had held a 'party' for his men, and that a female prisoner had been the guest of honor, before being killed. The whole school had in fact been aware, as Tom had intended the woman's fate to be another warning, something of which he seemed to be quite an enthusiast. "I'm sorry. But he could still be alive in Azkaban, as only the woman was executed as far as I know."

Remus suddenly paled and he stared at the Map in both relief and horror. "He's not dead."

Harry looked over at the Map to see the name of Remus' partner next to the names of Severus Snape, Genevieve Parkinson and Lucius Malfoy. "That's the Headmaster's office. Why would they be torturing him in there?"

Remus shook his head. "I don't know."

Pansy supplied what she thought might be the answer. "Mother said I should leave early because she was due to attend a meeting of the Inner Circle to discuss the attacks that have been happening. I delayed leaving so that I could find out who was attending. Perhaps they intend to torture your partner until he tells them what he knows."

"If he's still alive, then there's a chance I might be able to rescue him," Remus said, well aware of what his partner must be going through.

"The first chance you might get to figure things out is next week. Lucius is holding a ball in a week's time to officially celebrate my formal engagement to Draco," Pansy informed him. "And due to the numbers, it's being held at Hogwarts in the Great Hall. I can take the Map in with me and then get it back out to you if you want, although it might not help at all."

"Do you know if there's a set guest list?" Harry asked.

"There is," Pansy said, and she had a feeling she knew why he was asking. "So you'd have to find someone to impersonate other than Malfoy this time. Mother said that after the recent attacks, security has been heightened and Malfoy is supposed to be staying in Hogwarts until the party."

"Then can you suggest anyone else?"

Pansy drew a blank. "I'm doubtful I could find anyone. And I'm going home shortly to decide on what I'm going to be wearing to the ball, but even I will have to return to Hogwarts tomorrow. My mother has demanded it."

"Then I think that once again it's up to you," Remus said in a worried tone. He flashed Harry a quick smile. "And Harry will spend the next few days filling us in on what else might be helpful before I put him through withdrawal."

"Withdrawal from what?" Parvati asked without thinking.

"The Dark Arts," Harry said. "When I cast those sorts of spells, my eyes no longer turn black, which means I'm addicted." He stopped her before she could protest. "Don't say I'm not, because I am. And I have to be honest and say that I enjoyed hurting Malfoy, something I know I would never have been able to say before taking his place in Slytherin."

Padma had a question. "Why are you so badly affected and not Pansy?"

"I am," Pansy had to respond. "But Dad always puts me through withdrawal every summer, even though Mother isn't very happy about. I think she'd like to see me as completely immersed in the Dark Arts as she and my sister Petra are, but I don't want that, and Dad knows it. But I'm not so sure I'll get away with it this summer."

"Why didn't your dad do the same for your sister?" Harry asked, never having heard Pansy discuss it up until now.

"Petronella is the Parkinson heir and the name is carried through Mother's line," Pansy explained. "She had full say in how Petra should be brought up, but she wasn't so bothered about me. Now that I'm about to get engaged officially to Draco though, that may change."

"We'll help in any way we can," Remus promised. "Will you be able to get away after the Ball to return the Map to us?"

"I don't know yet," Pansy had to admit.

"The Hufflepuff tunnel," Harry suggested. "I know I can't get into the Ball itself without an invitation, but as a Death Eater I could easily get into the grounds."

Pansy was then told about the tunnel and she agreed to meet Harry in it.

19th July 1997

Pansy swiftly headed for Hufflepuff and slipped inside. She stopped for a moment on entering the darkened common room, which was empty now that the children were on holiday. Aware that she might be missed if she delayed for too long, she headed for the corridor that led to the boys' dormitories before she opened up the tunnel to discover someone she hoped was Harry waiting for her. "Hello."

"It's just me," Harry said, and lowered his mask to reveal an unfamiliar face. "I didn't want to take the chance of looking like someone anybody knows. How are you holding up?"

Pansy shrugged, not wanting to go into how badly Draco was treating her. "Could be better but I'm okay. I do, however, have some bad news."

"Come this way," Harry suggested. "You can then head back up to the school, saying you decided to take a breath of air outside."

The two talked as they walked along the passageway, Pansy telling Harry everything she knew. She also gave Harry the bad news, which he was more than a little dismayed to hear.

As they reached the outside wall, Harry gave Pansy's arm a gentle squeeze. "Don't take risks, Pansy."

Pansy stopped him before he could open the door. "Harry, is it serious with you and Granger?"

Harry nodded. "Yes. When this mess is over, I'm going to ask her to marry me."

"I thought that might be the case." Pansy gave him a tearful smile. "Why is it that all the good guys are taken?"

Harry had had no idea that Pansy liked him in that way, especially given her statement about George at the start of their friendship. "I don't know, but I do like you, Pansy, very much in fact, and if things had been different, then I think I could easily have fallen for you."

Harry's words took the sting out of his news, and Pansy kissed his cheek. "You're a really good friend, Harry. Now be careful."

"I will," Harry promised as he put his mask back on and opened the door.

The two of them had barely stepped out of the bushes, the door closing behind them when a voice demanded, "Identify yourself."

Harry put his arm around Pansy and turned around. "I'll roll up my sleeve. My name is Gareth Edwards."

The Death Eater checked Harry's arm. "And you?"

"I'm Pansy Parkinson," Pansy said, holding out her arm for the Death Eater to check it. "We were getting some air."

The Death Eater rolled his eyes behind his mask. "That's a new name for it. You'd better head back to the Ball, I'm sure your fiancé must be missing you."

Pansy reddened, and she let Harry lead her away. "You need to go."

Harry waited until they passed a clump of bushes, before he transformed in his dog form and then dashed off, leaving Pansy to return on her own.

Once Harry reached some bushes close to the gates, he transformed yet again and strolled down and out of the gates, the wards ignoring him as they always did. He wondered exactly where Remus was waiting and he kept walking until he felt a hand clamp down on his arm and the recognizable tug of a portkey.

Next Chapter: Tom holds a disturbing public display.

Chapter 59: The Executions

Harry took the glass of milk from Hermione he had asked for and sat down. "I almost got caught coming out of the tunnel. Thankfully the guard thought Pansy and I had been up to no good, otherwise it could have made things rather difficult for us."

"Did she get the Map to you?" Remus asked, taking a sip of the scotch he had poured himself on arriving back.

Harry shook his head. "She said her mother never left her alone." He then gave a sigh. "I'm afraid I have bad news."

"Give it to us," Remus said.

"Our wannabe has scheduled some public executions in Diagon Alley for tomorrow evening, one of which is going to be that of Amelia Bones," Harry said, not knowing of any way to break it gently to Neville, who was probably the only person there who truly cared about the head of BritAD. "But she isn't the only one he's going to be executing."

Neville was stalwart as he asked, "Who else?"

"They took Dumbledore from St. Mungo's..." Harry began, and when no-one else seemed unduly bothered about the former Headmaster's impending demise he continued, "...Destin Simon and Paul Henri of FDD, Michaela Bradford and her daughter, who apparently is a trainee Auror at USAD, and, I'm so sorry, Remus, but he also has Ignatus and someone I presume is another Unspeakable by the name of Bravo."

Remus deflated all the more as he received the news, his head dropping into his hands and his glass of scotch falling to the floor.

Since she was perching on the edge of the arm of the chair where Remus was sitting, Cordelia tentatively moved to place an arm around him. Everyone was surprised when Remus hauled her onto his lap and buried his face in her neck. It was unusual for Remus to act this way, and Harry's news had obviously knocked him for six.

Holding him, Cordelia could feel his tears trickling down her neck. "Were they someone close?"

"I didn't know Bravo that well and I have no idea who he really is, but Ignotus, well, he was a very different matter," Remus managed to get out after a few minutes, and he tried to pull himself together.

Padma hazarded a guess. "He's a close friend?"

Remus nodded, almost unconsciously tightening his grip on Cordelia. "He is."

"So what are we going to do to help those who are going to be executed?" Justin asked. "They may know of where other Aurors are, and we can't just let this bloke kill them."

"Because it's a full moon I couldn't help if I wanted to," Remus said in a firm but saddened voice. "And even though you're not an Unspeakable, just like me and Harry, you know the score and what we're supposed to do."

"Walk away if an operative is compromised and cannot be rescued," Justin said in a flat voice. "But this is different, Remus."

Harry backed his best friend up. "He's right, Remus. We have to help!"

"As I've already said, I cannot help," Remus said with regret. "And as much as I hate to say it, we're in no shape to take on our wannabe."

"But..." Justin began.

Hermione agreed with Remus. "He's right, Justin. We just don't have enough people to mount an attack."

"We have to try something," Justin protested.

Remus disagreed. "They will have scores of Death Eaters, Justin. It would be a suicide mission, and I refuse to give you or Harry permission to attempt anything."

Standing next to him, Luna slipped her hand into Harry's. "I really thought things couldn't get any worse."

Harry lifted his head up, his face determined. "I have to be there, to know for sure."

"Harry, no!" Ernie protested. "I bet he's doing it to try and draw out possible rebels."

Remus could feel Harry's determination and after gently tipping Cordelia off his lap, he strode over to Harry, tugging him out of Luna's grasp and swinging him around to face him. "I know what you're planning, Harry, and I want your word that if you go, you will go as a member of the public, stay in the background and not interfere unless you're attacked."

"But..." Harry tried to argue.

Remus shook his head. "No, Harry. Your word as a Potter, please."

Harry reluctantly gave it. "But I am going to observe."

"Then I'm going with you," Sirius said in as resolute a voice as the one Harry had used earlier.

"It's not a good idea," Harry told him.

"You're going to need some support," Sirius said gently. "If you go, then you're going to have to watch someone you know executed in what might not be a pleasant manner and that won't be easy. You can always get us out if there's a problem."

Harry reluctantly agreed, aware that Hermione or Justin might offer to accompany him if he said no. "Okay, but the moment there's any sign of trouble, then we're leaving."

Sirius had hoped that Harry would react exactly as he had. "I promise."

20th July 1997

Harry was not surprised to find the streets crowded in Diagon Alley, especially as Pansy had told him that posters announcing the executions had been posted all over wizarding Britain, although not having been to Diagon Alley in a while, Harry had not see them. Making their way to the front, Harry using his Dark Mark to get past

the ordinary bystanders, Harry and Sirius ended up standing before a large wooden platform. Suddenly the crowd starting cheering and Sirius shivered as a very familiar gold masked man strode onto the platform.

Harry felt the tremor run though Sirius and he squeezed his arm before turning to face the stage once more as Tom addressed the crowd.

"Subjects, we are here today to witness what happens to those who dare to move against me." A huge roar went up as the individuals Harry had been told would be executed were led onto the dais in chains.

As the prisoners were arranged in a row, Tom pulled out his wand and large wooden stakes appeared. Tom then addressed his men. "Attach them to the stakes."

Tom then spoke to the crowd again. "While I would normally not show mercy to those who would defy me, I am willing to pardon each and every one of these prisoners if they agree to kneel and offer their allegiance to me."

Everybody watched with bated breath as once he had finished with his offer, Tom headed towards Amelia Bones, who looked terribly thin and had obviously been tortured.

"What's it to be, Madam Bones? Do you wish to join your niece in the afterlife or join me?"

Amelia made her feelings more than a little plain. "I'd rather die than serve a bastard like you." She then spat at Tom.

Tom was not fazed by Amelia's outburst and simply pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his mask off. "You could have just said no." He then tied a ribbon to her arm, before moving on to his next potential victim.

Harry tensed at the sight of the cloaked individual, the hood still doing its job and protecting his identity, although the cloak showed signs of fire damage.

Tom gave the cloaked man the same choice he had just given Amelia. "And you, Ignotus... will the legendary head of the Unspeakables agree to serve me?"

Ignotus shook his head and gave the simple answer Tom had not expected from Amelia. "No."

The same question was asked of the Unspeakable next to Ignotus and again a negative response was received.

Tom moved on, having attached no ribbon to either Unspeakable, before going down the line, Destin and Henri both refusing, although a great deal more rudely than the Unspeakables had. The two Frenchmen were treated similarly to Amelia and had ribbons attached to their arms.

Tom then reached Michaela Bradford, the head of USAD, Amelia's counterpart. "And what about you, Commander Bradford? Will you serve me?"

Usually a proud woman, Michaela hung her head in shame and defeat. "If you let my daughter go, then yes, I'll serve you willingly."

As frightened as she was, Michaela's daughter, Emily, shook her head. "Don't do it, Mum."

Michaela gave her daughter a gentle smile. "I can't let you die, Emily." She looked again at Tom. "Give me your word that you'll let Emily live and leave unharmed, and I'll serve you."

"Will you give me the location of USAD's Alpha site?" Tom asked.

Michaela balked, and Emily tried again when she saw her mother's reluctance to capitulate. "Mum, you can't tell him. You can't."

"I'll give you a few minutes to decide," Tom said, before walking over to the final prisoner. "Dumbledore, I'd like to say it's a pleasure, but Azkaban has not been kind to you, has it?"

Albus Dumbledore now resembled nothing of the man he had once been, Tom having him imprisoned in Azkaban once again after taking him from the long term illness ward in St. Mungo's. Albus'

hospital gown was by now filthy, his body emaciated and his eyes cloudy with confusion. "Who are you?"

Harry's stomach clenched at the pitiful voice, and he was grateful for Sirius' comforting presence as Sirius placed a hand on Harry's shoulder.

On the dais, Tom responded to Albus' question as he removed his mask. "I'm Tom."

"Tom?" Dumbledore asked. "I know you, don't I?"

"You do."

As Tom circled the restrained man, showing his face to the crowd for the first time, everyone gasped, Harry and Sirius included.

Sirius leant forward and moved his mouth so that it was close to Harry's ear. "This explains a lot, Harry. He's a younger version of the real Dark Lord. He must have used a Horcrux to come back."

Up on the stage, Dumbledore strained to see the man in front of him, and it was as if the infirmity that Azkaban had wrought on him had slipped away. "You had such potential but you squandered it, my boy. You could have done so much good." Then as quickly as the sane moment had arrived, it vanished, and Dumbledore found himself squinting at the young man in front of him. "I know you, don't I?"

This time Tom ignored him, and he pulled off a ring before sliding it onto Dumbledore's finger. "Scelus Anima Exorius."

Sirius watched in dismay as a black treacle-like substance began to ooze from the ring. "Oh Merlin! That's another Horcrux."

Harry leant his head backwards so that he could respond to Sirius. "I think we were right about how many he must have had."

And then Harry and the crowd swiftly fell silent as the substance began to consume Dumbledore until eventually he disappeared from sight. A gasp rose up once again as a shadowy figure began to appear, until eventually a young man who looked identical to, and no older than Tom, stood next to Dumbledore.

Tom watched his doppelganger's eyes widen as he aimed his wand at him. "Auferus Veneficus Penitus."

Sirius knew what the spell would do, and he whispered to Harry, "It's a magic stripping spell, but unlike the one used on Luna, this one will kill the victim."

As if to prove Sirius' words correct, the doppelganger collapsed and he began to scream until finally he was silent.

Tom turned to face his mesmerized audience. "For those of you who have no idea what you just witnessed, you should know that, although I don't exactly look like the Lord Voldemort you once knew, I am him. But unlike him, I have succeeded in taking Dumbledore's power to add to my own. To those in the crowd who would seek to free those here today, please feel open to try. But be warned, if you do, then your fate will be much worse."

Tom walked over to a very ashen Michaela. "The Alpha site, please."

Michaela glanced at her daughter. "I'm sorry, Emily."

Emily sagged in her chains, believing that her mother was about to give up her friends and colleagues. She quickly realized however that her mother was apologizing to her for a very different reason as Michaela shook her head.

"I cannot tell you."

"Then your daughter will be the first example of the night," Tom declared, and he waved his wand at the far corner of the stage, a cage appearing. He then tied a ribbon to Emily's arm, who was shaking but trying to hold back frightened tears, as despite her brave words, she was now terrified.

Her fear was well founded as, moments later, a tall, feral looking man apparated into the cage and it soon became obvious to all those watching what was about to happen.

Michaela began to beg for her daughter and Tom turned to her.

"This is your last chance. If you give me the address of the Alpha site, then I'll spare your daughter and release her unharmed, and you will take her place. However, my offer to serve me no longer stands."

Michaela offered up a prayer of apology and said, "Nantucket Island."

"No!" Emily screamed as her mother gave away the full address of the site when pressed to do so by Tom.

Keeping his word, Tom removed the ribbon from Emily's arm but left her chained to the stake. "As promised, you'll be released alive and unharmed."

Emily collapsed weeping in her chains as Tom continued up the line until he stood in front of Ignotus and Bravo.

Sirius felt Harry tense up and he turned to whisper in his ear, "Don't even think about it, Harry. You've seen what he just did to Dumbledore."

Harry forced himself to stand still as Tom addressed Ignotus and Bravo.

"You two were the only ones to refuse my offer with dignity. Avada Kedavra. Avada Kedavra."

Ignotus and Bravo both slumped forward, the chains preventing them from hitting the floor.

Harry forced himself to pay attention to what was happening on stage, and he wondered if the rebels that Ernie had surmised might be watching were now forcing themselves to do the same as him... watch impotently and do nothing.

Around Harry and Sirius the crowd all took several involuntary and fearful steps backwards as the man in the cage began to change. All of them, including Tom, were more than stunned when Destin began to do the same, the French Auror having finally been captured after the previous full moon, and a second cage was hurriedly conjured up and Destin portkeyed into it to complete his change.

Tom tied the ribbon he had removed from Emily onto her mother's arm. "I was going to place you in the cage with Greyback, who has a tendency to play with his victims first, especially the women, if you catch my drift. However, I think it only fair that your counterpart dispatch you."

Emily began to scream as her mother was portkeyed into Destin's cage and he launched himself at Michaela.

Unlike Greyback, Destin had not taken Wolfsbane and he was both angry and frightened. Michaela stood little chance as Destin ripped out her throat. Silence reigned and for a short time the only sound that could be heard was that of Emily's sobs.

Tom made his way up to a pasty Amelia. "I'm afraid, Madam Bones, that you will be joining Greyback, although I think you're a little too long in the tooth for his baser needs."

Harry closed his eyes as Amelia was also portkeyed away, Greyback dispatching her as quickly as Destin had done with Michaela, proving Tom's comment correct.

Tom had one final victim to deal with. "Henri, any final words?"

Henri's throat had closed up with fear and he mutely shook his head. The next sound he was to make was a scream as he was portkeyed into Destin's cage and his former boss tore him apart.

Tom was not surprised to see that some of the viewing audience had been sick to their stomachs. "Please let this be a lesson to anyone who would move against me. Good evening."

Emily, as Tom had agreed, was cut free from her bindings, where she collapsed to the wooden floor, weeping.

Harry said softly to Sirius, "We need to help her but I'm not sure I can walk that far. My legs are shaking and I feel sick."

"I've seen far worse," Sirius said, before saying, "Give me your cloak."

Harry slipped his invisibility cloak to Sirius. "I thought we weren't supposed to do anything."

"I didn't give my word," Sirius said, manhandling Harry into a side alley. "Stay here, I'll be back in a minute."

Harry could still see the stage and the fact that it was crawling with Death Eaters, even now. "You haven't got a Dark Mark."

Sirius judged the distance. "Do you think I could summon her?"

"There are probably spells all over... she's getting up."

Sirius flung Harry's cloak around him and he headed through the lingering crowd, almost running in a sobbing Emily as she stumbled down the stairs.

All heads turned at the frightened scream Emily gave as an invisible Sirius grabbed her, and Harry knew that they were in trouble. From the shadows he aimed his wand, hoping that Sirius had a good grip on the girl. "Accio Emily Bradford."

Harry realized he had overpowered his spell in his panic as he was knocked to the ground by the force of two bodies catapulting into him, but he still didn't hesitate and he disappeared, taking Emily and Sirius with him.

Potter Place

It was a little too much for a terrified Emily and she vomited in a spectacular fashion as she arrived in the hallway of Potter Place, spraying the wall and floor.

Sirius, as usual, went green under Harry's cloak and he literally threw it off and ran, his hand clamped over his mouth.

Having heard the commotion, Hermione came hurrying out, Justin and the others on her tail. "Oh my God!"

Harry vanished the vomit as Cordelia rushed off and returned with a flannel and a glass of cold water for Emily. She then knelt down beside the trembling girl. "Here you go. You're safe now."

Emily looked almost dazedly at Cordelia as Cordelia wiped the girl's face clean. "They killed Mum."

Everybody looked to Harry, who shook his head and said, "Not now."

Sirius returned moments later and he knew that Emily had recognized him by the way she shrank back against Cordelia. "It's okay, Emily."

Harry moved so that Emily could see him properly. "He's on our side, Emily, but this isn't the time for explanations. I need to go to the Alpha site."

Emily recognized Hermione from the newspaper but she couldn't understand why Harry was there. "You're all hallucinations. You're all hallucinations."

Sirius stunned Emily, just as he had with Ginny when she had begun to get hysterical. "She's no use to us like that." He then massaged her throat as he fed her a full dose of calming potion. He then enervated her, not surprised when she again pulled back from him. "I've given you a calming potion. We have to go to USAD's Alpha site and we really need your help."

Emily took several deep breaths, the calming potion doing its job and allowing her to think logically. "How are you here?"

"Harry rescued me," Sirius said.

Harry continued, "Younger Voldemort, or should I say, Tom, used Imperius Potion on Sirius to force him to commit murder in his name, and I survived because of some magical cufflinks I was wearing."

Emily took this in. "How do I know it's the truth?"

Harry quickly swore an oath giving her a little more information about the situation as he did before asking, "So now will you help us?"

Emily nodded. "How?"

"You'll have to vouch for me," Harry said, rolling up his sleeve. "I took the Dark Mark to get into Hogwarts to try and rescue the other pupils but it was nigh on impossible."

"You have a Dark Mark?"

"I gave it to him," Sirius said. "But we don't have time to discuss this now."

Emily let Sirius help her to feet. "Do you have any anti-nausea potion? I still feel queasy."

Sirius again dipped into his pocket. "I do."

After taking it, Emily straightened up. "I think I'm ready."

Harry took the international portkey and cloaks that Justin had left to fetch. "We'd better be off." He passed a cloak to Sirius before addressing Emily. "I'd prefer it if you kept quiet about our real identities."

"What do you mean?"

Harry flung up the hood of the cloak he had slipped on. "Because of this."

Now Emily understood. "Oh!" She made a suggestion. "I'll take an oath but you need to give me a wand."

"We've been scavenging them as and when we can," Harry said. "You'll have to pick one that might be suitable."

"I'll fetch them," Luna offered and she ran off.

While she was gone, Emily asked a few questions. "So how many of you are there?"

"This is pretty much it," Harry said before telling a lie to cover what Remus was. "Remus Lupin, the former Deputy Head of Hogwarts, is also part of our group but he's out searching for Aurors."

"Searching for Aurors?"

Hermione joined the conversation. "We lost both the Alpha and Beta sites. Whatever remaining Aurors that are out there have gone to ground."

"We've been searching ever since Remus escaped from Hogwarts but nothing. The only Aurors I know that escaped Tom ran straight back into him when they attempted to infiltrate Hogsmeade."

"So there's absolutely nobody left?"

"Nobody," Justin confirmed.

Luna returned at that moment and held out six wands. "Perhaps one of these will be suitable."

Emily honed in on an oak one and swished it through the air before making an oath that she'd keep Harry's and Sirius' identities as Unspeakables a secret. "I'm ready when you are."

Nantucket Island

Sirius whispered softly to Harry as they surveyed the huge building in front of them, "I think they know something is wrong."

"I think you're right," Harry responded. "Let's go."

Emily led Harry and Sirius in, marching up to the guards on duty and showing their identification as alarms began to blare, Harry's Dark Mark setting them off.

Emily had no identification. "I need to speak to whoever is in charge. Tell them I have information about Voldemort and my mother, Commander Bradford."

A short time later, Emily found herself being escorted to an interview room where, after swearing an oath to the veracity of what she had say, she quickly apprised the man in front of her as to the situation. "... and so I think you should get out and head for the Beta site."

Harry and Sirius were subsequently introduced to the head of USAD, LA, Tobias Jenkins, who led the way towards the main hall where there was a flurry of activity. "We started moving things out once the Fidelius failed. Are you going to come with us?"

Sirius shook his head. "We need to return home, Commander Jenkins. We're more than a little short staffed."

Tobias shook both Sirius' and Harry's hands. "Then good luck."

Emily did likewise, and Harry and Sirius hurried out of the building, before surveying their surroundings in the dark of the night. "I think we should hide up there."

"Why?"

"I want to make sure everyone has gotten out before we leave," Harry said, although he knew that even if they didn't, there would be little he could do to help. The two of them disappeared to the spot Harry had pointed out before invoking invisibility spells and watching from a distance. "We'll go back and check in a while."

Within the space of a few minutes, the building was seemingly deserted and Harry prepared to disapparate to check when Death Eaters began to appear around him and, after feeling wards spring up, he whispered to Sirius, "I have to check to see if everyone is out safely. Don't try and leave without me unless these wards fall." Harry didn't give Sirius a chance to argue and he shot to his feet, materializing in the darkness and joining the throng.

Sirius, however, had no intention of staying behind and waiting for his godson to return, and so he did as Harry had just done: he straightened up, transfigured and slipped on a mask before dropping his invisibility spell and joining the crowd heading towards the building.

Upon entering the building, Harry found himself in the group following Tom and a silver masked man, although Harry had no idea who was behind the mask, but judging from his height, he guessed at Snape. Although he suspected that everyone had gotten out, Harry was gratified to see that the building was completely empty, everything having been shrunk and shipped out by the USAD Aurors.

As they scoured the building, Tom grew angrier and angrier. "Someone must have warned them somehow."

Because the group had to wait until a respectable time between portkey jumps, it was a frustrating three hours for Harry, more so because he was unable to leave the building; he just hoped that

Sirius had been able to get out, not for one moment suspecting that the black clad man next to him was his godfather. When Tom gave the order to leave, Harry had no choice but to take the rope portkey that was doled out, the Death Eater next to him seemingly stumbling as they vanished, forcing the man to hold onto Harry, only letting go of him when they reappeared in the Great Hall at Hogwarts.

Hogwarts

On arrival, Harry immediately noticed a difference from when he had been attending the school as Draco, as where once the Great Hall had housed four large tables and the head table, now there was just the head table and smaller tables dotted about the Hall.

Tom headed for the head table. "You may all remove your masks and sit down." Everyone except for those in the silver masks obeyed the command.

Harry was glad that he had managed to disguise himself during the time he had spent waiting to leave, having tapped his ring after thinking about who he wanted to look like, using the same image he had when he had met Pansy in the Hufflepuff tunnel, a sort of a cross between Hans Solo and Luke Skywalker, his shaggy chin length light colored hair and brown eyes a far cry from his usual visage. Harry, however, had to stifle a sharp intake of breath as he recognized a disguised Sirius, who had taken the seat next to Harry. Harry knew then that the Death Eater next to him hadn't stumbled but it had been Sirius grabbing him to ensure safe passage through any wards that might be in place.

Both men were soon on their feet as they were chosen to make the trip to Azkaban via portkey to collect some prisoners, Sirius once again discreetly taking hold of Harry's arm as they vanished. As the group were led through the prison Harry was disgusted at the conditions the prisoners were living in, and his heart jumped as he spotted Arthur and Molly Weasley, who were curled up against Fred. At least he could give some good news to Ron, who had been worried sick about his family imprisoned there.

Making their way up to the high security level, Harry found himself standing outside of a large barred room. Inside it were almost fifty Aurors, all somewhat dirty and not too pleasant smelling, although it was obvious that these women were receiving a better diet

than prisoners like the Weasleys, as unlike them, they appeared well fed. The man he suspected was Severus, pointed to a group of four women, one of whom was wearing a different uniform than the others, and Harry knew she was an American Auror.

"They'll do."

Harry entered the cell, his wand drawn like the other Death Eaters. Scanning the room, he looked for Tonks and anyone else he might know, but apart from the girl in front of him, Harry knew no-one. As he took hold of Julianne Solace, one of the four women that had been selected by Severus, Sirius also grabbed Julianne's other arm, and together they dragged Remus' former girlfriend to her feet.

They then left and headed back the way they had come, before again using the rope as a portkey and leaving. Harry was more than a little surprised when he was ordered to tidy the rope away, and he followed a fellow Death Eater into the side room off the Great Hall, where the Death Eater threw his rope into a pile of others, and Harry followed suit, not able to keep hold of the rope with the Death Eater waiting for him to leave. Frustrated, Harry then returned to the Great Hall, sitting down at a table near the back where Sirius had moved to as all the chairs at the front had been taken. Harry was to be glad they had been as the night continued to unfold.

Tom stood up and addressed the girl Harry had recognized as an American Auror. "What's your name, girl?"

"Tabitha Jenkins."

Harry had a terrible feeling that this girl was related to the man they had spoken to at USAD.

"Well, Auror Jenkins, your former Commander told me about Nantucket Island but when I arrived, the building was empty, although it was very evident that its occupants had only just left. Where is the Beta site?"

"What Beta site?" Tabitha asked in a trembling voice.

Tom turned to the man at his side. "Altus..."

"I'm a former British Unspeakable, Auror Jenkins," Altus said in a cultured voice. "And although I don't rank highly enough to know where the Alpha and Beta sites are for USAD, I am well aware that they exist. And I'm also aware, as are all Aurors and Unspeakables in BritAD, where the British sites were as your British colleagues can attest. So if you wish to survive this night in one piece, I think you should tell us where your Beta site is."

Tabitha trembled as she spoke, but she didn't respond to Altus' demand, instead addressing Tom. "I won't tell you anything."

Tom decided play hardball. "If you don't tell me what I want to know, then your British colleagues are going to be paying the price." Tom pointed to a redhead. "And she'll be first if you don't cooperate."

The redhead yelled out, "No matter what they do to us you'll keep your mouth shut, Jenkins."

Tom flicked his wand and chains appeared around the redhead's hands dragging her to the ground. "I'll eviscerate her if you don't tell me."

Harry was hard pressed to remain seated but he well also aware that he would likely end up dead if he tried to interfere. Even so, every fiber of his being screamed out that he should be doing something to help.

Suddenly he felt a foot nudge him under the table and Sirius gave him an almost imperceptible shake of the head, warning Harry not to attempt to interfere. Harry therefore had no choice but to watch the events unfold as again the redhead ordered Tabitha to remain quiet.

"No matter what he does to me, you'll say noth..." Her words faded away to be replaced by a scream as Tom sent a cutting spell at her.

Tom then addressed Tabitha. "That was just a simple spell. It will only get worse if you remain silent."

Tabitha did exactly that, closing her eyes and clamping her hands over her ears as the redhead began to scream as Tom carried out his earlier threat.

Harry struggled not vomit and he noticed that Sirius had paled as one of the younger Death Eaters rushed out of the room making gagging noises.

At the front of the room Tom silenced the screaming girl with a Killing Curse before deciding to change tack. "Perhaps a different form of coercion." He subsequently aimed his wand at the remaining two girls, and they were hit with cleaning and freshening spells, before their clothes were vanished and replaced with something a little more provocative.

Tabitha was pale as she realized what Tom was going to do but she remained silent when Tom demanded she give up the Beta site.

Annoyed but hiding it, Tom turned to those seated. "You can do whatever you choose to these two women. I think the brunette first. Who wants her?"

The door to the Great Hall slammed open and a tired looking man stepped in. "I do."

Harry's hackles went up at the sight of Greyback – he was surprised the man hadn't gone to his bed as Remus usually did after a full moon.

What Harry didn't know was that Greyback had returned to Hogwarts from Diagon Alley, intending to do exactly that but had overheard the conversation coming from the Great Hall. As Tom had intimated the previous night, Greyback had a certain proclivity for rough sex, and he had shaken off his tiredness for the possibility of indulging his baser needs.

Tom beckoned to Greyback. "Greyback, she's all yours. But should Auror Jenkins offer up the information about the Beta site, you will stop."

Greyback advanced on the brunette, wrapping his fingers around her throat. "Hello, my pretty."

The girl scrabbled at his arm but although she was strong and well-trained, he was most infinitely stronger and he dealt with her as if she was a twig in the wind. As dark spots began to play in front of

her eyes she was pushed backwards onto the table, Greyback's free arm ripping away the flimsy clothing before undoing his zipper.

The girl sucked in air as Greyback released her throat in order to grab her arms and shove them above her head. Her gasping intake of breath turned into a scream as Greyback pushed into her.

Harry let his gaze wander around the Great Hall, not willing to watch although he was unable to shut out the girl's screams. A few tables away he could see that Draco was obviously enjoying the show, his excitement more than evident as he lounged back in his chair. Harry turned his gaze to Tabitha Jenkins who had again covered her ears and closed her eyes. He wondered if she would eventually crack as her commander had.

After making several loud grunts that made Harry almost want to vomit again, Greyback climbed off his victim and buttoned up the placket on his trousers.

Tom addressed the werewolf, aware that no-one else would want the girl now that a half-breed had had her. "Do you want to keep her?"

Greyback shook his head. "No."

Harry tightened his fists as Tom casually incanted the Killing Curse.

Tom then pointed at Julianne Solace. "I think you should go next. Who wants her?"

A short man came forward, his gut hanging over his trousers. "I do."

Julianne waited until the man approached her. As he began to push her against the table, she kneed him in the groin as hard as she could. The man's scream of pain echoed around the Hall as he collapsed, and Harry had to hold back a smile of satisfaction.

Tom merely left the man lying where he was and turned back to his followers. "Next?"

A big muscular man went next. "Let's see how you do against me."

Julianne looked up at the Death Eater who stood at least six inches taller than her, but this time she didn't wait for him to manhandle her, instead attacking him first. Everyone was shocked as the massive man was brought to his knees almost as quickly as the first man.

Tom turned to face her, ensuring that his wand was drawn, as he began to wonder if there was something unusual about this woman. "I know you're not a werewolf otherwise you'd have changed in Azkaban. What are you?"

"Well trained and I'm not about to take this lying down unlike those two," Julianne said defiantly.

Tom smiled at the sight of his two men still lying on the ground. "I'm tempted to move on to another woman but I think I might have someone who is more than your match. Greyback, would you care for seconds?" Tom turned to Tabitha. "Unless you wish to tell me where the Beta site is.

"Don't you dare!" Julianne snarled at the girl, even though she knew what was going to happen to her, and she reiterated the redhead's earlier order. "No matter what they do to me, you will not tell him anything."

Tom held out his hand. "Then, Greyback, she's all yours. But as with the last girl, should Auror Jenkins offer up the information about the Beta site, you will stop."

"Yes, my Lord," Greyback said as he stepped forward.

Julianne knew without question what this man was and she readied herself. "You're going to end up just like them."

Greyback laughed. "I don't think so." His hand shot out, intending to grab Julianne around the throat just as he had his first victim.

Instead Julianne ducked under the arm, kicking out at Greyback's legs, catching him behind his knees and bringing him to the floor, his head sharply rapping the table and then the floor as he went down. Not hesitating, she drove her foot between his legs and, unlike the other parts of his body, this was a soft one, and he screamed out in agony.

"Enough!" Tom said as Julianne went to kick Greyback again. He turned to those gathered. "Any other takers?"

No-one offered; Julianne had brought down Greyback and, if she could bring down a werewolf, then this girl was dangerous and no-one felt comfortable taking her on.

Tom tutted as he tapped his wand against his leg. "It almost seems a pity to torture and kill you."

"Better to suffer and die than let a creep like Greyback touch me!"

"So be it."

Harry sat with clenched fists as Tom used a slower version of torture on Julianne, who kept on telling Tabitha to remain silent in between her screams.

When Tom finally used the Killing Curse, Harry closed his eyes, only for them to open again when Tom barked out, "Bring another four girls to replace her."

When Tom's order had been fulfilled, he addressed Greyback as the werewolf finally got to his feet. "Ready to try again?"

"No, my Lord," Greyback wheezed. Although he was a werewolf and his metabolism would help him recover quicker, it still wasn't quick enough to allow him to continue his debauchment.

"Then leave." Tom then moved on to a small Asian girl who reminded Harry a great deal of the former Ravenclaw seeker, Cho Chang, and Harry was far from surprised and more than a little disgusted when Draco got up out of his seat.

"I want her."

Harry decided there and then that he was going to make Greyback, Tom and Draco pay for their actions as Draco made his way to the front of the room before he forced himself onto the small Asian girl. When Draco had finished, he sauntered cockily back to his seat. He glanced at Harry as he sat down, and asked loudly, "What are you looking at?"

Everyone's attention turned to Harry and Draco, and Sirius wanted to groan - Harry had let his anger show on his face.

However, Tom thankfully misinterpreted Harry's fury. "If you wanted her first, then you should have spoken up."

Harry's mouth suddenly dried up as everyone turned their attention on him and he struggled for a second to think of something to say.

It was Sirius who saved him. "My friend here is probably thinking the same as I am: That he's sorry for Malfoy's fiancée if that's the best he can muster."

Tom ignored the raucous laughter around him and asked Sirius, "What's your name?"

Sirius kept his cool as he responded, "Simon Blackwell, my Lord."

Tom glanced at Harry. "And you?"

Harry's brief moment of panic over, he offered up the name he had given the guard who had caught him coming out of the Hufflepuff tunnel. "Gareth Edwards, my Lord."

Tom caught the look that crossed Draco's face. "You know each other?"

Harry grinned, guessing that the guard had blabbed to Draco. "I know Malfoy's fiancée, my Lord."

Tom nodded and continued on his way, but he was unable to miss the hissing remark Draco made to Harry.

"And if you ever go anywhere near her again, I'll fucking kill you."

Harry gave a smile he knew would irk Draco. "I'll go wherever I choose."

Draco's wand flew into his hand and almost automatically Harry's and Sirius' hands did the same, as Draco rose to his feet demanding, "A duel, right now."

Spinning around from where he had ground to a halt, Tom coughed and Harry, Sirius and Draco swiveled their heads to look at him. "Another time perhaps. At the moment I do believe there are things happening taking precedence to your petty squabbling over a girl."

Harry quickly bowed slightly, his earlier hiccup well behind him. "I apologize, my Lord. I was out of line."

Sirius and Draco did the same and both of them sat back down.

Harry's satisfaction at infuriating Draco was to fade as was forced to watch as man after man forced themselves onto the tiny Asian girl that Draco had raped first, and once she had been tortured and killed, on to the next Auror who had also been picked, while Tabitha sat and wept.

Ignoring what was going on, and feeling bored, Tom made his way back down to where Harry, Sirius and Draco were seated. He was about to walk by when an idea had presented itself when he noticed that the three men were still exchanging piercing glares. "Malfoy, Edwards, Blackwell. I think you three can provide us with a little entertainment tonight. Present yourselves tonight at nine together with your seconds."

Blaise hurriedly stepped in to offer his services to Draco when his friend gave him a pointed glance. "I will be Draco's, my Lord."

Tom knew only too well that Draco would be top dog in Slytherin when the new school year began and that it served Blaise well to offer himself up. However, inter-school politics didn't really concern him and he was about to move away when he noticed Draco mouth 'you're dead' to Harry. Tom therefore decided to step in to prevent a pre-duel brawl. "Until then you will refrain from attacking each other. Am I clear?"

Harry, Sirius and Draco nodded. "Yes, my Lord."

"All four of you may leave," Tom said, dismissing the quartet.

Harry was relieved to be able to leave the Great Hall and he hurried out, but Draco was right behind him, grasping Harry's shoulder and slamming him up against the wall.

"I'm going to fucking kill you, Edwards."

Sirius was about to grab Draco when he heard Tom's voice coming from behind them.

"I thought I was explicit in my instructions," Tom said, having suspected Draco might well ignore his orders. "Malfoy, although I grant you a great deal of leeway, don't think I won't punish you for this transgression." He turned to Harry. "Malfoy has forfeited the duel by breaking the agreement. Blackwell, Edwards, what would you like me to do with him?"

"I want his fiancée," Harry said after a moment's thought. He was well aware that Tom had expected him to state a punishment but Harry hoped to remove Pansy from Draco's aegis with his request.

Sirius, however, offered up an alternative he believed Tom would approve of. "I think he should be punished by the Inner Circle."

Tom turned to one of the guards and whispered something to him, before turning to Draco. "You will still present yourself tonight at nine. Fail to appear and I will kill you. Zabini, Blackwell, you may also leave. Edwards, stay here."

Dismissed, Draco bowed low, before doing as Blaise and Sirius had and offering up his respects. "My Lord." He then gave Harry one final venom-filled glance before stalking off.

Sirius headed off towards the exit, hoping that Harry would work out where he was going.

Tom beckoned to Harry. "Come with me."

A now very nervous Harry followed Tom to a large room, which was obviously Tom's private suite of rooms and Harry was told to sit down. Tom called for a house-elf and passed on a message Harry was unable to hear. Soon a knock sounded at the door, and it opened to reveal two silver masked individuals.

Tom waved off their greetings. "You can take off the masks. I will obliviate Edwards when our business is concluded."

Harry's stomach lurched at the mention of obliviation but he had little choice in the matter if he wanted to get out alive. He listened as Tom outlined what Draco had done and what Harry had demanded. Lucius had little option but to agree to Harry's terms. "I'll dissolve the engagement."

Genevieve Parkinson also nodded. "I agree. Draco is no longer worthy of my daughter." She stared pointedly at Harry. "And if you know what's good for you, you'll treat her well."

"I like Pansy," Harry responded truthfully. "And unlike some, I would never force my attentions on her, nor would I ever raise a hand against her."

Genevieve reddened. Pansy had told her about Draco's forceful and unwelcome attentions but Genevieve had refused to end the engagement, telling her daughter it would be a privilege to be joined to the Malfoys, although she no longer thought that. "She must like you if she told you that."

"She does," Harry said truthfully once more. "And Malfoy is scum to treat a woman in that way, and I'm looking forward to witnessing his punishment tonight."

"As am I," Genevieve stated, her tone more than frosty as she thought about Draco's failure to follow their master's orders.

"Lucius, Genevieve, you may both go," Tom said.

Genevieve nodded politely at Harry before replacing her mask, although Lucius ignored him and stalked out.

Now alone, Tom studied Harry's face. "I don't recall marking you."

Harry was glad that he had chosen to look much older than his real self. He was also glad that he had now had calmed down since, unlike earlier, he now had no Sirius to back him up. "The first Lord Voldemort marked me, but my allegiance is of course to whoever is in power and I do believe that would be you."

Tom laughed. "You're very outspoken, especially given you're defending Parkinson against what I'm having my men do to those Aurors tonight, and you don't seem to be afraid of me."

Harry put Tom right. "I am afraid of you as I saw your demonstration at Diagon Alley last night, and I'd be an idiot not to pay attention to such a warning." He then thought quickly about what had gone on that night. "And those Aurors are casualties of war, but what Malfoy did to his so-called fiancée was spineless and I don't like cowards."

"And from his attitude, I don't think your friend does either," Tom remarked.

Harry confirmed that to be the case, before Tom pulled out his wand. As he did he noticed that Harry didn't flinch, although he had no idea that it had taken Harry quite some effort not to do so. "Obliviate."

Harry felt a little dazed and he blinked to clear his head. "My Lord?"

"You're dismissed," Tom said, before adding a rejoinder. "But you will join me at the Table tomorrow night to watch Malfoy's punishment."

"Yes, my Lord," Harry said and he hurriedly left. He knew that on the way back he would probably have to make a slight detour and collect Sirius, hoping that his godfather had headed for the Hufflepuff tunnel outside to await him.

Next Chapter: Harry makes himself stand out even more.

Chapter 60: A Way In

21st July 1997

Two Hours Earlier

Although he was absolutely exhausted from his transformation, just like Greyback, Remus shunned his bed that morning, although for an entirely different reason. Spotting that everyone was actually up, although Justin and Ron were both fast asleep on the rug in front of the fireplace, he immediately asked after the previous evening as he tiredly sat down. "Why aren't you all sleeping?"

Cordelia filled him in on what had happened. "...but Harry and Sirius aren't back yet."

Remus immediately got back to his feet. "I'm going to the Alpha site."

A red-eyed Hermione grabbed his arm. "Justin and Ron went when they didn't come back after an hour. The site was crawling with Death Eaters and there was no sign of Harry or Sirius." She then gave him the worst news. "And his hand on the family clock moved to school to 'mortal danger' before changing back to 'school'. We think he's being held in Hogwarts."

Remus slumped backed down. "This is not what I needed to hear." He knew, however, that he had things to do. "Luna, can I speak with you in the study?"

Although she too was tired and red-eyed, Luna followed Remus. Once inside the study, she was told to sit down.

Remus went to the cupboard and took out a vial. "This is a memory for you. It's from your father."

"Why didn't you give it to me before?" Luna asked, her hand trembling as she took it from Remus.

"Because I couldn't," Remus said cryptically. "And if I'm hopefully wrong, it won't work at all."

"I don't understand."

"Do you know how to operate the pensieve?"

Luna shook her head. "No."

"Then I'll come in with you and then leave."

Suddenly feeling very nervous, Luna asked, "Can't you stay?"

Remus shook his head. "I'm afraid not." He pointed to the vial. "Pour it in."

Luna did so, and then her hand was taken by Remus. Once inside the pensieve, Remus instructed Luna on how to use it, using a sample memory for her to practice with. "After I leave, just think about what you want to view and then flick your wand in the manner I showed you. I'll be back to extract you in about ten minutes."

With a trembling hand, Luna began the message and she was a little bewildered to find herself facing what appeared to be an Unspeakable. As the Unspeakable dropped his hood, she murmured, "Oh Daddy!"

With tears in her eyes, Luna listened as Xenophilius started speaking.

"Luna, angel, this particular memory will only initially work for you, although I have adapted it so that someone else can start the message for you. As you will hopefully have worked out by now, I'm Ignotus, the head of the Unspeakables. If not, then I know it must be a big shock finding out that your father is not the person you thought he was."

Luna gave a huge sob, as she finally understood why Remus had been so upset when he had heard about Ignotus' pending death. However, if nothing else, Luna was a brave girl and she rewound the message slightly, having missed what her father was saying.

"...thought he was. I experienced the same shock when I received a message from my own brother telling me what I'm about to tell you now. The title of Ignotus usually passes from family member to family member, and as my brother handed it down to me, I'm handing it down to you. I want you to continue to run the Quibbler.

It's an essential tool for the Unspeakables out there on assignment. You see, angel, not all of our stories were what I led you to believe they were. They were mostly a way of passing on messages to other Unspeakables."

Luna stopped the playback, giving a half smile. "No wonder you were always taking us abroad." She knew that her father couldn't hear her, but she didn't care and she continued to talk to him. "Why didn't you tell me before, Daddy?"

As if he had heard his daughter, Xenophilius answered the question. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner but I didn't want to burden you with the truth. However, the Quibbler is an important tool, Luna, and even though others mock it, it must go on. And it must be you who does this."

Luna had always loved helping her father with the Quibbler, and she understood now why he had hurried to re-establish the paper after their original office had been destroyed. She turned her attention back to her father.

"Once you have seen it, you can, of course, reveal this memory to anyone you think necessary, and if possible to Kingsley Shacklebolt, who is better known as Bravo, my next in command. If Kingsley is unavailable, then show this memory to Professor Lupin, who you might be surprised to hear is also an Unspeakable and called Amicus, or if not, to Harry Potter."

Xenophilius then addressed his comments to those other than this daughter. "Kingsley and Remus, under the circumstances, you're free from your oath to keep my identity secret and may speak freely about anything we have ever discussed, as it may be necessary to help you guide my daughter. And Harry, if it's you watching this memory with Luna, please continue to take care of my daughter and I wish you every bit of luck in trying to defeat Voldemort."

Xenophilius' face then became filled with sorrow. "I will miss you so much, Luna, and I'm sorry to pass such a responsibility on to you." The sorrowful look vanished beneath a mask of seriousness. "However, I am going to offer you the same exit that was offered to me: If you feel you cannot shoulder the burden, you may choose another to take your place. When you have made a decision, please use the password 'Phil Lovegood Ignotus Luna Lovegood' to review

another message contained within this message. A second message will then play to enable my successor, be it you or somebody else, to make the necessary transition." He then sighed. "I love you, Luna, my angel, and I always will."

As the memory went grey, Luna broke down and sobbed, and she was hardly aware as Remus joined her and extracted her from the pensieve. Holding the sobbing girl against him, Remus rocked her, murmuring softly to her. Soon though, Luna managed to get a hold of her emotions and, although her voice was heavy with tears, she still managed to speak to Remus. "I suppose Daddy must have made that recording after I lost my magic. He never knew I got it back, but he still wanted me to run the Quibbler and to take over as Ignotus."

"If that's the case then I should imagine that he believed you were the right person to take over when he either resigned or..."

Luna understood why Remus didn't finish the sentence. "Daddy would have said that because he loves me. But I can't take on the position of Ignotus even though I am magical again, so I think you should take it. There's a message for you to see."

Remus refused. "It's not for me. The title of Ignotus is supposed to pass down the family line."

"And Daddy said I could choose another, and, seeing as Bravo, who was someone called Kingsley Shacklebolt, died last night, I'm choosing you, Remus," Luna said in a surprisingly firm voice. "I really can't do it. I know how to operate the printing machinery and I want to carry on running the Quibbler, but I can't run the Unspeakables."

"I'm sure your father thought the same when he was offered the position," Remus said trying to encourage Luna, although he was hiding his secondary upset at hearing the surprising news about Kingsley, who had also been a good friend to him.

Luna shook her head. "I don't know if he did, but I do know that I don't want to take his place. It should be you."

Remus also didn't want the responsibility but he knew that he had little choice under the circumstances. "I'll do it on a temporary basis, but when I feel you're ready I will hand the position back to you."

"I don't think I'll ever be ready," Luna told him. "But I agree. You'll need to see Daddy's message to me."

After a few moments, Remus entered the pensieve, and when he emerged, forty minutes later he was stern faced, and it was obvious that he had also shed a few tears. "I've done what I need to do as far as taking over the mantle of Ignotus is concerned, but now I want to make you an Unspeakable, Luna. If you're going to run the Quibbler, then it's only fair you're part of the team."

Luna had another bout of tears and Remus put his arm around her. "I'm sorry, I'm rushing you. We can do whatever is necessary later." He then held Luna as she continued grieving for her father.

An hour later

Almost silently both Harry and Sirius apparated in to discover that everyone was in the family room: Luna was resting with her head on a sleeping Hermione's lap on one of the sofas; Justin was lying like a big puppy on the rug, his hair flopped over his eyes and Ron was lying with his head in the crook of Justin's knees; and Ernie was propped up against the other sofa on which Padma and Parvati were spread out sleeping. Only Remus and Cordelia were awake, both seated on the fireside chairs.

Remus sprang to his feet upon seeing Harry and gathered Harry into his arms. "Thank Merlin!"

Harry could feel Remus shaking and he asked in a muffled voice, "Remus?"

Remus didn't answer, simply holding Harry. As Remus looked over Harry's head, Cordelia put a finger to her lips and nodded towards the direction of the study before whispering softly, "Why don't you talk to Harry in the study?"

Harry didn't expect Remus to side-apparate him and he gasped at the unexpected sensation. Once inside the study, he disentangled himself. "Remus, what's wrong?"

Remus wiped his eyes. "I honestly thought I'd lost you and after last night..."

"You mean Ignotus' death?"

Remus leant against the desk, his legs shaking with relief. "I mean Phil Lovegood's death."

Harry was stunned to hear this. "Something's happened to him?"

"He was Ignotus, Harry," Remus said, his voice heavy with grief. "He left Luna and me a message. That's why can I tell you who he was now; he freed me from my oath via the message."

Harry was struggling against shock and disbelief. "But he can't have been. He chased after ridiculous animals, he ran the Quibbler, he..."

"He did it as a cover, Harry," Remus said interrupting Harry. "It's used as a medium to get messages to operatives who would otherwise have their cover blown."

"Oh God, poor Luna," Harry said, finally accepting what Remus was telling him. He then also offered commiserations to Remus. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you." Remus accepted Harry's commiserations before he ran a hand over the back of his neck. "I don't what to ask first: where you got to, what happened at the Alpha site..."

"I'll show you everything." Harry was about to withdraw his memories when he remembered what he was about to reveal. He therefore headed over to the drinks cabinet and poured out a firewhiskey before handing it to Remus. "But before I do, after what you've just told me about Mr. Lovegood you might want this first."

"More bad news?"

Harry nodded. "I'm afraid it's about Altus."

Remus closed his eyes, momentarily struggling against his tears. "He's dead?"

"Not exactly," Harry said, aware that the news was going to hurt more than if Altus had been. "He was at Hogwarts."

"He was being tortured?" Remus asked before seeing the look on Harry's face. He experienced a moment of dismay. "So no execution or demonstration?"

Harry slowly shook his head. "I'm sorry, but no."

Remus knocked the firewhiskey back and the glass refilled. "That means he betrayed us, doesn't it?"

Harry could see how much this was hurting Remus but he knew that Remus would see the truth from his memory anyway. "More than that. There were demonstrations and your friend was helping to lead them."

Remus took a very large slug of his drink before pointing to the pensieve. "You'd better show me exactly what happened last night."

Remus subsequently watched in horrified silence as Harry's memories unfolded, closing his eyes as Destin and Greyback did their unsavory work. When it was over and Harry showed Remus what had happened at USAD and then his interaction with Tom, Remus gripped Harry's shoulder. "Why did you freeze up?"

"I almost felt like a first year again," Harry admitted. "Everyone was looking at me and it was as if my voice had gone. I'm just grateful that Sirius ignored my words about staying behind and came with me. I'd have been stuffed without him."

"At least you're safe now."

Harry gave Remus an almost embarrassed look. "Actually, I'm not, not exactly. You need to see the rest of my memory."

Remus watched the remainder of the memory in silence before shaking his head as it ended with Harry meeting up with Sirius in the Hufflepuff tunnel. "You're not going."

Harry disagreed. "Remus, this is our best chance for one of us to get inside."

"No!" Remus almost yelled.

Harry had never seen Remus so upset before. "But it's my job; it's our job actually."

Remus took a shuddering breath. "Harry, you have no idea what I went through this morning when I discovered you and Sirius hadn't returned and your hand was set 'at school'. Hermione told me you'd been in mortal danger; I suppose when you messed up. I imagined that you'd been caught and that you were being tortured just as I had been. And all the time I was comforting Luna and dealing with Phil's death, all I could think about was you and it felt as though my heart was being torn in two."

Harry could offer Remus no comfort. "I'm sorry but you know as well as I do that I have to do this tonight."

Remus hated that Harry was right and he threw his glass at the wall. "Why is it always you? Can't fate give you a fucking break?"

"Apparently not," Harry said as he cleaned up the mess, not bothering to repair the fragmented glass. "I must have done something terrible in another life."

Remus didn't appreciate the humor. "This isn't funny, Harry."

"I'm not laughing," Harry said in a serious tone. "But fate or no, it's up to me to do this – it's not as if you can go in – Greyback would figure out what you are."

"I could send Sirius in," Remus theorized before shaking his head. "But Tom knows you both exist and are seemingly friends, so that won't work. I'm worried thought if you do this, he'll work out who you are."

"He's not worked out it was me so far and I don't think he will," Harry said. "If things start to get hairy or we're getting nowhere, I'll simply vanish, but I have to do this."

Remus sank down onto the desk. "I know." He gave Harry a wry smile. "I'm sorry I had a meltdown. I thought I was well beyond tantrums by now."

Harry grinned back. "I'm not, so why should you be immune?" He then stretched tiredly. "I suppose I should go and tell Hermione what's been going on."

"She won't be waking anytime soon," Remus revealed. "I gave them all hot chocolate with sleeping potion because they were all refusing to go to bed, so none of them will be up until tonight at the earliest. Oh, except for Justin and Ron; they headed out to the Alpha site to check on you and were shattered by the time they came back and since they fell asleep naturally Cordelia said to leave them."

"Then I should go and get some sleep myself."

Remus shook his head. "I'm afraid not. As you pointed out, we have a job to do and, after seeing your memory, that includes warning the Beta site of USAD."

Sirius chose that moment to come in. "I was just going to go up to bed."

"No, you're not, you're coming with us to the Beta site of USAD," Remus told him. "So I suggest you cloak up."

This comment caught Sirius by surprise. "How do you know where it is?"

"In truth I don't," Remus admitted. "However, I do know that USAD used to have a base in the desert out by Las Vegas, but they closed it when they moved to Los Angeles. So, if they're there, I want to find out exactly what the situation is. And given that I'm now Ignotus..."

Remus didn't get any further as Harry interrupted this time. "You sort of missed out telling me that!"

Remus quickly explained what had transpired that morning. "...and so I'm in charge of the Unspeakables now. In fact, I might as well promote you, Harry. I need a second in command, and given that my choice is limited, Sirius, I'm going ask you..."

This time Sirius interrupted. "You're not making me your first in command?"

"No, Sirius, I'm not," Remus said, totally unmoved by Sirius' hangdog expression. "Harry has been an Unspeakable since his second year, so I think he's next in seniority, even if he is younger than you."

Harry was rather tickled by Remus' offer. "Thank you, Sir. I accept."

"What about Justin and Ron?" Sirius asked, thinking about the only other people not sedated apart from Cordelia. "Shouldn't they go with us? I know they're not real Unspeakables but I think we need someone else who's handy with a wand in case of trouble, and although Ron's dueling isn't exactly great, Justin is the next best person to me when it comes to dueling that I know of apart from Harry."

Remus agreed, deciding that he would make the two young men temporary Unspeakables in order to protect their identities.

Harry grinned. "You do know that's going to piss Hermione off, don't you?"

"I know," Remus acknowledged, Hermione having expressed the wish to become an Unspeakable on numerous occasions. "But she's worse than you and Sirius when it comes to arguing about things."

"So?" Sirius butted in.

Remus gave his friend an exasperated glance before asking Harry, "What's one of the first rules of being an Unspeakable, Harry?"

Harry couldn't help but grin. "To obey orders."

Remus turned back to face Sirius. "Something you seem to have forgotten."

Sirius mock saluted. "Yes, Sir."

"I'm going to speak to Justin and Ron."

Although Cordelia made it clear that she was far from happy with Remus' offer, Justin was eighteen and he overruled his mother's protests. "Of course, I'll come."

Ron was just as eager. "Wicked!"

"I have a couple of spare cloaks I can key to you," Remus told them before picking up a piece of parchment, tapping it with his wand and passing it to Ron. "Here's your I.D." He then did the same for Justin.

"Couldn't anybody just do that?" Cordelia asked.

Remus shook his head. "Only the head of the Unspeakables or, in times of emergency, his next in command."

Ron asked about a name for himself. "What will I be called?"

Remus smiled. "Look at your ID."

"Gambit!" Ron said with a grin, recognizing the chess term and a move he used quite often.

Justin in turn looked at his own ID. "Amicus?"

"I can change it if you don't feel comfortable with my old name, and it's only a temporary assignment," Remus said.

"I like it," Justin said, feeling rather honored to have been given the name, "even if it is only temporary."

Remus could feel Justin's mingled disappointment and pleasure. "You're not happy that it's only temporary, are you?"

"No, but I can't expect it to be permanent," Justin said. "I know you're only doing this because you're shorthanded."

"True," Remus said, before holding out his hand. "However, given that I can't see the ranks of Unspeakable growing quickly anytime soon, I think that maybe I should make this permanent."

Justin hesitated in handing over his ID. "But I have nothing to offer."

"Sirius pointed out that you're almost as good as he is when it comes to dueling and he's exceptional," Remus said, as he took the ID and tapped it before he handed it back to Justin.

Justin now felt even better about his appointment. "That's quite a compliment."

"You deserve it," Remus said, before reaching out for Ron's ID. "And Ron, you're a great strategist before you start arguing with my reasons for making this permanent."

"I wasn't going to," Ron said, grinning as he took the ID back.

Remus tilted his head slightly. "The others are coming."

After Cordelia had given them all hugs and they had all put up their hoods, Remus operated the international portkey. They had obviously chosen the right place as, on arrival, his and Harry's Dark Marks set off every alarm in the building, and within moments the group was surrounded. All five of them immediately showed their identification, but even with that, the group was still lead at wandpoint to a cell and forced to surrender their wands.

When they were finally led towards an interview room by Emily Bradford, Sirius was the one to take point. "I'm glad to see you all made it safely."

The tall black girl smiled at Sirius. "Thank you, we did. Commander Jenkins is in here."

As the group was led in, Emily taking her place at the back of the room, Tobias glanced at the cloaked Remus, who was standing in front of everyone, presuming quite correctly that it was he who had taken on the role of head of the Unspeakables. "So we have a new Ignotus, I see."

It was Remus who answered him. "Yes, and although most changeovers are much less public, you know as well as I do that my credentials are good."

Tobias had checked out all five badges before entering the room. "They are and your pass codes are also valid." He handed over everyone's wands and their badges. "I'm sorry, but as you can appreciate, we've lost too many men not to take precautions."

"I've seen some of your men, well, the women," Harry said. "There are about ten female USAD Aurors being held in Azkaban..."

Remus took over from Harry when he hesitated, glad that he had seen Harry's memory. "And I'm afraid that we have reason to believe that one of them might be related to you: Tabitha Jenkins."

Tobias' jaw tightened. "She's my daughter."

"I'm afraid that our so-called Voldemort, or Tom as he's calling himself, was using her as an example," Remus told him. "He was trying to find out where the Beta site is located."

"She won't tell him."

Remus suspected differently. "Tom was holding other Aurors over her head as collateral; he was having his men rape them until she told him."

"So we need to leave?"

"I don't know if she broke," Remus said, Harry having left before they had started on Tabitha. "But I suspect there's every chance as she was the next in line when Risus was ordered to leave."

"I want to see his memory."

Harry could see no reason why he shouldn't show Tobias. "Very well."

Tobias was white-knuckled as he watched an abbreviated showing, Harry skipping over the worst parts. "So you don't know if she's alive or not?"

"I'm afraid not," Harry told him.

Tobias withdrew from the pensieve. "And is there anything you might want to tell me about this Tom?"

Harry took over from Remus. "There's not much we can tell you that we believe you don't already know, except maybe that we believe he used a Horcrux to kill Dumbledore and steal his power."

"I know about the power transfer but not what he used to do it," Tobias said. "Nor do I know what a Horcrux is."

Remus explained what one was before he went on. "As we believe Tom used a Horcrux to come back, he now looked like his younger self and doesn't look anything like the man who used to bear Voldemort's name. Although I assume that you had people in the crowd to tell you that."

Tobias nodded. "You assume correctly. I had several operatives in the crowd and we had hoped to effect the release of Commander Bradford, but unfortunately we had to abort that mission."

"Did they tell you about Commander Bradford giving away Alpha site's location?" Remus asked.

Tobias nodded. "It was agreed that my operatives would rendezvous back at this site if she did. When they didn't return to the Alpha site, we began packing." He then abruptly changed the subject, not wanting to dwell upon his former colleague and friend. "So did you merely come here to warn us or is there something else we can we do for you?"

"A little of both: I believe we now need to work together, given our much reduced resources, and I felt it only fair to introduce myself and to fill you in on the current situation."

"I'll be honest," Tobias responded. "We've lost almost two-thirds of our men, mostly on the East Coast site as the West Coast was not as badly hit, but it's been enough to bring us to our knees. I have a sneaking suspicion that the French are in the same condition, and who knows about the other smaller European wizarding communities. I've contacted the Australians and they believe Tom is your problem and they want nothing to do with it, although they have agreed to provide medical supplies to us, but they're refusing to go anywhere near Europe or the UK."

Remus sighed. "So much for Bones' efforts to try and improve relations with them. What about the rest of the wizarding governments around the world?"

Tobias shook his head. "They're all taking the same stance as the Australians – it's your problem. And as much as we'd like to help ourselves, we're in no position to render assistance."

"You do realize that Tom won't stop at the UK and Europe, don't you?" Remus asked, not bothering to hide his frustration.

"We do," Tobias acknowledged, "just as we're aware that he hit us because we're the largest task magical force in the wizarding world, or at least we were until this happened." He brought up the UK's numbers. "Do you know many of your people survived?"

Remus shook his head. "No, but I doubt it's more than a handful. I was working undercover and couldn't reach any of our emergency sites, Gambit, Noir and Amicus were in a similar situation, and Risus was too ill at the time to respond. We do know that there are still about fifty Aurors alive in Azkaban, but Tom is only keeping them alive to use as leverage or as playthings for his men. Once he has no further need for them, I believe he'll kill them."

"There's no chance of rescuing them?"

Harry could hardly believe that Tobias had bothered to ask. "There are too few of us unless..."

Tobias shook his head. "I'm sorry but I can't...."

Alarms began blaring yet again and Remus glanced behind him. "Gentlemen, we have to go."

"You're leaving?" Tobias asked in astonishment.

Remus refrained from laughing at such an inane question. "You've just told us we're on our own, and given how few there are of us, I'd say the same applies in reverse. Stupefy. Stupefy."

"What are you doing?" Harry asked in astonishment as Tobias and Emily went down.

"I need to remove any knowledge of our being here," Remus said quickly. "If they're compromised, they might give us away, particularly as you showed him your memory, and you and Sirius were part of the group to go to Azkaban and who knew the status quo."

"Then take them with us," Justin barked out. "I've got the feeling they'll die if you don't."

Harry gave Remus a different choice. "Restrain them and ask for an oath if they want to stay."

Remus did as Harry asked, first asking Emily what she wanted to do.

"I want to fight," Emily said staunchly.

"You'll die if you stay here," Remus said bluntly.

Tobias made a suggestion. "Then take Auror Bradford with you. If we make it out of this alive she can act as a liaison between our groups."

"But you're staying?"

Tobias nodded. "I'm not leaving until I know that everyone is out safely." He withdrew his wand and swore a quick oath. "Your identities are protected, so if you will excuse me, I have work to do."

Remus pulled out a portkey, which he quickly keyed for a short jump. "I need to try this, although I doubt it will work." Remus was both surprised and relieved when it did, and he guessed that the ward-breakers had failed to erect anti-travel wards. "I just hope the other Aurors take the same option."

"Do you know where they'll go now?" Harry asked Emily as he sat down on a bench in a park, although he had no idea of where it was.

Emily shook her head. "No, but Commander Jenkins might have gone to the Delta site, which is only known to a few key figures in the US magical community, and it's intended as bolt-hole, a place where a small working magical government can be set up in a time of emergency."

"What about ours?" Justin asked, sitting down next to Harry.

"Empty," Remus revealed. "Bones, her first, second and third in command, and Ignotus and Bravo were both captured as was Fudge."

"You were Ignotus' number one before you were demoted, weren't you?" Justin asked.

"Yes, and I'll explain in more detail when we're safely away from here," Remus said. "Let's give it twenty minutes and we'll head home."

"It's not long enough between Transatlantic jumps," Harry protested.

"After this length of time, it won't kill you, but it will render you unconscious," Remus told him. "Normally I wouldn't do this but I feel too exposed out here and you need to rest before you return to Hogwarts."

"And I don't care what you say," Sirius said forcefully. "I'm going as well tonight."

Later that night

As had been agreed, Harry marched into the Great Hall, up to the table and bowed low, Sirius doing the same. "My Lord."

"Gentlemen," Tom said, in the middle of his meal. "Please remove your masks and take the seats next to Acerbus."

Harry guessed this was Snape, and he reluctantly sat down in the free space closest to Severus, a house-elf appearing at his elbow to enquire as to his choice of beverage.

Just like Harry, Sirius opted to keep a clear head and chose water. He then spent the next thirty minutes listening to the conversation flow back and forth, listening for anything which might help them, and occasionally answering the odd question. Then the clock struck nine and the food vanished, leaving the table laden with just goblets and water glasses, and the doors to the Great Hall flew open as Draco Malfoy walked in.

Harry had to give Draco his due, although he must have been frightened, it was not obvious on his face. Then Harry remembered about calming potion, and he decided that the Malfoy heir had to have taken some.

Tom rose to his feet. "Malfoy, I'm pleased to see you accepted my invitation. Kneel."

Draco dropped to his knees. As Harry had suspected, Draco had taken calming potion, but even so, he was quaking inside. He had seen how Tom punished his followers, but Draco had been more than a little angry at Harry and hadn't thought before he had attacked him.

Tom by now had reached Draco. "I was going to punish you myself but I have decided that Blackwell's suggestion of allowing each member of the Inner Circle to discipline you is only fair as you broke the agreement. My Circle will therefore perform one non-lethal spell upon you as a penalty. Acerbus, you're first."

Harry watched as Acerbus went forth and cast a bone breaking spell on Draco's shoulder bone, before stepping back. Harry was surprised the spell was not more severe, and then he decided it was probably because Snape was Draco's godfather. Then Altus went next, and he cast a blanket spell on Draco making the young man scream out and writhe in pain as flaming cuts appeared over his body, obviously aggravating the broken bone in Draco's shoulder, before Altus walked away as the flames died.

As Argentus got up, Harry wondered if all of the Inner Circle had names beginning with an 'A'. After holding the blood boiling curse on Draco up until the point where it would be lethal, Argentus walked away. Tom then called out for Accredo, and Harry had his question answered about names as a woman rose up and walked over to Draco. Harry felt sick as the spell she cast caused a strip of skin on Draco's face to peel back, revealing bone and sinew beneath. Draco's screams were now interspersed with gasps and whimpers.

Tom swiveled around. "Blackwell, the final spell is for you."

Sirius knew he was going to shock Harry as he aimed his wand at Draco, who found himself lying on his stomach as Sirius immobilized him and stripped him of his shirt. He then spoke the spell that would put an invisible whip to work. "Verbero Tergus Quadraginta."

"I do hope he survives that as I said non-lethal."

Still at the table, Harry was, as Sirius had expected, more than a little shocked at Sirius' use of such a spell, although it was obvious from his smile that Tom approved, despite his words.

"He's young and fit," Sirius remarked casually. "He'll survive and if he looks as though he's going to die, I'll cancel the spell."

"You may rejoin us," Tom said and Sirius headed back to the table.

Although Harry hated Draco, he half wished Sirius hadn't the cast the spell though, as by twenty, Draco's screams were at fever pitch.

Harry was more than a little relieved as they died down at twenty-five, and Sirius finally rose up and ended the spell at thirty. "Finite."

Tom snapped his fingers. "Take him to be healed." He then once again turned his focus on Harry. "As that little piece of business is behind us, I wonder if you would care to indulge in a show duel against Argentus later tonight seeing as young Malfoy robbed us of our entertainment."

From his time as masquerading as Draco, Harry knew only too well that Tom periodically pitted his men against the members of the Inner Circle to keep them on their toes, and Harry was well aware that it would reflect poorly on him if he said no. "I'd be delighted."

Time seemed to fly by until the moment Harry was dreading was upon him and he had to make his way to the floor to face Argentus. As he did Harry had a sinking feeling that the man would want to make him pay for what Sirius had done to his son. Harry was therefore surprised when Lucius began slowly using only stunning spells.

As they built up in intensity, Harry fired off a Reducto spell at Lucius' chest, and felt a deep sense of satisfaction as it grazed Lucius' arm when Lucius twisted, causing the man to cry out and a slight gasp to echo around the Great Hall. Harry then stepped up his offensive, suspecting that even though he didn't hold the knowledge the man in front of him did, he was far more powerful than Lucius. And so he decided to purloin Sirius' blasting technique and began to send blasting spells at Lucius.

Lucius, who rated at over two hundred and thirty on the Magus scale, and someone who considered himself pretty powerful, wondered who the hell this man was, as he struggled to hold his shield up. He decided to feign defeat, and he dropped his shield, allowing Harry to blast him across the Great Hall.

Harry stood panting slightly as he let down his guard as he believed Lucius to be out cold. He was surprised when he found himself unable to see as a blinding spell hit him in the face. However, he didn't panic, as this was a technique that Remus had taught him... how to fight when he was blind or deaf, and Harry was well aware of where Lucius had been and that he would have to get to his feet. Harry fired off a bloodletting curse, and hearing a cry, he turned his wand on himself. "Resero Visum."

Now able to see again, Harry could see that he had scored a hit on Lucius' leg and he once again picked up using his blasting spells against Lucius. This time when Lucius' shield went down, he didn't hesitate.

"Expelliarmus."

Two wands flew through the air and into Harry's hands and Harry marched over to where Lucius was lying, bound him, and then revived him. "Do you yield, Acerbus?"

Aware that his wands were in Harry's hands, and that he had no chance of freeing himself from his bonds, Lucius begrudgingly gave in. "I yield."

Harry then released him, vanished his bonds, and held out his hand to help Lucius up.

Lucius took the proffered hand and his wands. "You fought well."

"Thank you," Harry said as both men walked before the table, Lucius wobbling precariously as he bowed before Tom. Tom dismissed Lucius to be treated and walked around the table. "Come with me."

Harry again found himself Tom's rooms and he waited for the man to speak to him. Tom looked assessingly at Harry. "Where did you learn to fight like that?"

"My parents arranged for tutors for me and dueling was one of my lessons," Harry said, thinking on the fly.

"How good are your Transfiguration skills?" Tom asked.

Harry had the sinking feeling that Tom was about to ask him to take over the empty spot in the teaching roster, and he told the truth. "Fair to middling. Despite my tutors, I'm afraid that Transfiguration is one of my weaker areas."

"Wait here," Tom ordered.

Now alone, Harry looked around the room. It was sparsely furnished, although the furnishings were of excellent quality. Several sofas and chairs were huddled around the fire, and three large bookcases lined the back wall. Harry could see two doors: one he presumed led to a bedroom and the other to a bathroom, although he didn't dare investigate.

Tom returned after ten minutes had gone by. "Come with me. I have a few tests I need you to undergo."

Harry was taken to a room he had never been in before, the door appearing after Tom had walked past a blank section of wall three times. Once inside the room, a chair appeared that Tom sat down on before he addressed Harry. "Your first test is to face a Dementor."

Harry forced himself to remain calm as seemingly from out of nowhere four Dementors appeared and not the single one he had expected. Taking a deep breath as a cold chill descended upon him, Harry quietly but determinedly incanted the spell he knew would disperse them. "Expecto Patronum."

Tom watched as a Patronus shot forth from Harry's wand and ran at the cloaked creatures, forcing them back. Tom banished them. "Good. Your next test will be..."

Harry was tiring by the nineteenth test as Tom had gradually asked him to perform darker and darker spells, but so far he had succeeded every time. Tom, however, had one final test for Harry.

Harry almost dropped his wand in shock as Remus appeared in front of him, albeit a bloody and broken version of him, and Harry swung around in surprise to face Tom. "I thought he had escaped."

Tom believed that he fooled Harry into thinking that Remus had been recaptured. "Obviously not, but I have tired of torturing him, so

I think for your final test, you should be the one to kill the number one escapee of the wizarding world for me."

"Thank you for such an honor, my Lord." Then, well aware that this was not Remus, Harry had no problem in taking aim and incanting out loud, "Avada Kedavra." It was only as the pseudo Remus collapsed from his knees onto the floor that Harry began to worry that what he had thought was a mere image was more than that. He was not allowed, however, to dwell on it.

Tom vanished the body and smiled at Harry. "I see that your Dark Arts are excellent, Edwards. However, I'm a little surprised that your eyes are black."

"I might be good at the subject but I'm not completely immersed," Harry said, having little choice but to be truthful.

"You soon will be," Tom said ominously. "You're going to be my new teacher in that subject."

"What about Parkinson?" Harry asked.

"Her transfiguration skills are first-rate," Tom informed Harry. Genevieve Parkinson would be unhappy about the change but even she did not dare argue with Tom. "You will be assigned rooms and should expect to arrive here the day before school begins."

"May I pose a request?"

Tom inclined his head. "Of course."

"I would like Pansy to share my rooms rather than returning to Slytherin," Harry said, as he was aware that the girl would have to return, and if he wasn't returning in Draco's place, then Harry wanted to protect her.

"Granted," Tom said, as he was in a very good mood. "Come with me, we have one more place to visit before this night is over."

Next Chapter: Harry reveals his news to everyone.

Chapter 61: The New Dark Arts Teacher

Hufflepuff Tunnel

Harry took Sirius to task the moment he joined him in the Hufflepuff tunnel. "Why did you attack Malfoy like that?"

"I didn't attack him," Sirius said, having expected this from Harry. "I was simply doing as I'd been asked to do."

"You almost looked as though you were enjoying it."

Sirius pinched the bridge of his nose. "Harry, nothing could be further from the truth."

"So why?"

"Because Tom will believe I'm a ruthless bastard and I think that, if nothing else, might get me closer to him."

"If he ever figures out..."

Sirius interrupted. "Harry, you'd be in the same position. As long as our rings don't ever fail us, then there's no way he should ever figure it out. And even though I know Remus is going to kick up an almighty stink about it, I have every intention of making sure that you're not without someone to watch over you. And if I have to torture a million Death Eaters to do it, then that's what I'm going to do."

Harry had never seen Sirius look so menacing before, the dim light in the tunnel enhancing the effect. "You almost frighten me."

"I'm sorry," Sirius immediately apologized. "That wasn't my intention."

Harry relaxed as Sirius' face did. "Where did you learn that spell from?"

"It's a Dark Arts spell," Sirius said.

"Do you know anymore?"

Sirius was surprised. "Why?"

"Because you're looking at the new Dark Arts teacher," Harry said.

"Fuck me!" Sirius said, letting the blasphemy out before he could stop. "Harry, you can't do it. You have no idea what the Dark Arts might do to you."

"Remus told me," Harry revealed. "And I'll just try not to do..." He trailed off at the look on Sirius' face. "What is it?"

"You won't be able to stop," Sirius warned him. "The Dark Arts are almost like the finest wine you've ever drunk... one glass will never be enough."

Harry could see how serious Sirius was. "You sound as if you're speaking from experience."

"I am," Sirius admitted quietly. "Harry, I not only know enough Dark Arts spells to write several large volumes on the subject but I also know how it feels to have that thirst and what happens when you've quenched it."

Harry almost took a step backwards. "You can't mean what I think you do."

"I'm afraid I do." Sirius could see that he'd definitely frightened Harry now.

Harry now took the step backwards he had been intending to a moment ago. "Are you a Death Eater?"

Sirius sighed. "No, Harry, I'm not."

"But how can you be immersed? Remus said the Dark Arts would twist me into someone I don't recognize if that was to happen, when it's obvious that you're perfectly normal."

"He said that because the process does do that, at least initially, but the final result depends very much on the individual." Seeing Harry's confused look, Sirius gave an example. "Alcohol makes Padma very unpleasant whereas it makes her twin act as though the whole world is hilarious. It makes Remus melancholy and Hermione a little silly. The Dark Arts is the same way. It twists people like Snape into

sadistic bastards and others like myself into someone who feels more comfortable in their own skin. Sadly for people like my cousin, Bella, it changes them so drastically that you don't recognize them anymore."

Harry hesitated. "Sirius, does Remus know about you?"

"No, it's something he wouldn't understand but I think if I'm going to help you, it's only fair to be honest and warn you what to expect," Sirius said, before making an offer. "But if you feel more comfortable telling him, then please do so."

Not wanting to betray Sirius' confidence, Harry shook his head. "It wouldn't be fair on you."

"That's very considerate, but should you wish to tell him you can."

Harry refused once more. "It's obviously not affected you, so we're good."

"Then we'd better head back and give Remus the news."

Potter Place

Remus, as well as everybody else, was waiting for the pair. "How did it go?"

Harry still felt more than a little bemused. "You're looking at the new Dark Arts teacher."

Sirius backed up Harry's words. "He's totally serious. Tom bought into Gareth Edwards."

"I'm just glad that the ring protecting Harry's identity can't be taken off by anyone but him, although thankfully Tom suspects he's already dead."

Harry gave Remus a heads-up. "He tried to convince me that he thought the same about you. He had me 'kill' you after the last trial, although now I'm afraid of whom it might have been that I killed in your place."

"Probably someone who got on Tom's wrong side," Sirius theorized.

Harry felt faintly nauseous. "So I killed someone..."

Remus placed a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder. "It's not your fault, Harry, and I suspect you may well have to do a lot worse than that if you return to take up the Dark Arts post."

"That's not helping," Harry said a little snippily, his stomach jolting, especially as Sirius' own words were now more than a little etched in his mind.

Remus backed off. "Look, why don't you just tell us what went on this evening and we'll take things from there."

And so everyone listened as Harry recounted his tale.

Hermione was far from thrilled with she discovered that Pansy wouldn't have to return to Slytherin. "And where is Pansy going to sleep?"

"The rooms are huge," Harry said, the rooms having been the last place he had visited that night, although not with Tom. "I can take the couch and Pansy can use the bedroom."

Hermione was still far from happy but she didn't want Harry thinking she couldn't trust him and so she let it drop as Harry went on to outline what was expected from him before revealing his final piece of news.

"I've seen the Ministry. Tom took me there to test how powerful I am as I easily overpowered Lucius Malfoy. The Ministry is operating on a skeleton crew, but Tom said he was going to be bringing in workers to fill spots as time went by. I think he's going to establish a working government."

"Why would he even tell you this?" Cordelia asked.

"He asked if I had ever been inside the Ministry since his takeover, and when I said no, he began to tell me about it," Harry said. "I think he was showing off to be honest."

Before Harry could go on, Luna interrupted him. "You can tell us about that in a minute. I want to know how powerful you are."

"I registered at three hundred and sixteen," Harry revealed. "I don't know who was more shocked, me or Tom. I'd expected about two eighty and not that."

"How did he take it?" Luna asked eagerly.

"He was pleased," Harry said, remembering Tom's delight in having someone on his side that was so powerful. "He then measured himself."

"And?"

"Four hundred and four," Harry revealed when pressed by Luna. "I don't think he was able to suck as much power from Dumbledore as he would have liked or his magic leveled out at that, but even so it's still enough to make him very powerful and very dangerous."

"But he's not even the real Voldemort," Justin pointed out. "At least he can die."

"And what if he merges with the real Voldemort?" Padma countered – she was still trying to score points off her ex-boyfriend, things between them far from amicable. "Can you imagine how powerful he would be?"

All fell silent as they contemplated the possibility, before Remus, Sirius and Hermione all went speak at the same time, Remus indicating that Hermione should go first. "Four hundred and four is probably as powerful as he's going to get – remember we all have a point at which we can't absorb any more magic."

Sirius agreed with her, saying, "And so the concept of a magical level holds true no matter who Tom merges with but I don't think he will ever merge with Voldemort."

"What makes you say that?" Parvati asked.

"If Tom was going to do so, he would have done it before now," Sirius said logically. "He wouldn't have waste a Horcrux to consume Dumbledore, and I doubt the real Voldemort would have done so."

Remus agreed with him. "That's probably true, and if it is, as we already know, Tom is evolved from a Horcrux: He used one to strip Dumbledore of his power, we have one and we know of two's destruction, which means that if our theory about a seven-way split is right, there is one Horcrux still out there, probably the Hufflepuff cup, as well as Voldemort himself."

"What's your point?" Ron asked, not getting what Remus was trying to say.

"That Tom can be killed," Remus said. "But for Harry to complete the prophecy, we have to find the other Horcrux and Voldemort."

"And my getting into Hogwarts might be the only way," Harry surmised. "So whether I like it or not, I have to take up that post."

"I want to go with you," Hermione told him. When Harry went to protest, she held up her hand. "I know what you're going to say but I thought of a way around the Dark Mark. I talked with Narcissa when I thought you were going back in masquerading as Malfoy and she told me that she knows that personal owls have a band around their ankle and are allowed into the grounds as everyone still gets mail. She thinks that non-personal owls are stopped at the wards and rounded up there."

Harry shook his head. "It's too dangerous."

Remus overruled him. "The more eyes and ears we have, the better, and I think that Hermione should go in masquerading as your owl, although I think that once we find out how the owls are banded and it's done, then she should perform a test run first by flying into Hogwarts from a point that is not overlooked. If the wards force a change, then she can at least get out."

"You can't be serious," Harry barked even more loudly at Remus than he had at Hermione.

Remus erected a privacy bubble. "I am and, as your superior, I'm telling you now that you will go along with this." He then sighed, softening his voice. "Harry, I hate doing this but we have very few options and I don't want to order you to do this and, so despite what I've just said, if you want out, then tell me now."

Harry exhaled noisily. "And what happens if I don't do it?"

Remus sighed just as noisily. "I believe that if we aren't willing to take chances, as you're going to do with Pansy, and I want to do with Hermione, then any hope we have of somehow ridding our world of Tom will fade and die. We'll spend our lives in exile, just hoping that things will change, and they won't, they'll just get more entrenched."

"That's a bleak outlook," Harry said in a quiet voice.

"But it's also a realistic one," Remus said softly. "But if you don't want to do it I'll try and find a way to get in myself, or if push comes to shove, I'll ask Sirius to go. But either way I want Hermione in there. Out of all us, she can travel freely in her owl form. However, I promise to pull her out if it begins to look dangerous for her or for Pansy."

"Then I don't have a lot of choice," Harry said dismally. "Greyback would find out who you are and even though he wants to be there to support me, Sirius is a security risk; it would only take Tom to say something that Sirius reacted strangely to and his cover might be blown."

Remus gave him a consolatory smile as he dropped the bubble. "Hermione, you're a go. We'll let Pansy know that she'll remain at Hogwarts as a pupil and you will provide us with air cover going in as Harry's owl. However if it looks like trouble then we'll extract you both."

Hermione could see that this did not sit well with Harry, despite what Remus had said to him. "We'll get through this, Harry."

Harry squeezed his girlfriend's hand. "I hope so."

Remus moved on, addressing the others. "Even though there is a war ongoing, you are all still of school age. Therefore, I propose to fulfill your magical contract with Hogwarts to complete your education."

None of them had considered it until then.

"But I'm still not entirely sure of what sort of magic I can do yet," Luna said, having been almost frightened to push her new magic too much.

"I know, Luna, but I'm still concerned the magical contract might remain in force, and we have until the end of your seventh years to make sure we comply with the magical contracts in force," Remus told the blonde girl. "I've therefore discussed it with Sirius and using Hermione's memories of the exams she took during her fifth year, I'll be able to recreate them again for you. I'll ask Harry to provide us of his memories of the sixth year exams he took as Draco Malfoy."

Harry brought up a glaring omission. "I didn't take Divination or Creatures and neither did Pansy."

"Sirius did," Remus told her. "And so Sirius and I will also provide copies of the exams we took to fill in the gaps - it won't matter that they're old, as long as you take a magical exam it will be enough. We will also provide all of the seventh year exams."

"I want to take mine before I leave for Hogwarts," Hermione said, confident that she would pass without a problem.

Harry nodded. "I'd better do the same, and I think Pansy should too, just in case anything happens."

"I'm ready to take mine now," Padma said, having already covered the remainder of the sixth year and the entire seventh year course material during her spare time.

"Then I'll arrange for that this weekend," Remus said. "I'm still magically authorized by the Ministry to act as a teacher, even if the Ministry isn't exactly the same place anymore."

"I'm nowhere near ready for exams," Parvati said in a disgusted voice. "And I'm not sure I care that much to be honest."

"This is not an option," Remus said firmly. "I can teach you the theoretical stuff from the books when I'm not out on patrol and, in their spare time, Sirius and Emily will teach you the magical side. Obviously, I know that your education is not the uppermost on your minds at the moment, but as there is little we can do, I decided it

would help to take your minds off things. I'm also going to be offering training to those of you who want it."

Neville sighed heavily. "Like Parvati, I hoped that we wouldn't have to take exams now."

"Well, you do," Remus said firmly, before moving on. "But we also have other things we need to get done, such as still trying to track down any survivors for starters. Although I don't truly expect to find anyone, and I don't have the lists of where anyone was at the time of the attack on the Ministry and the Alpha and Beta sites. Harry, it will be your job to try and learn what you can."

"Let's just hope that Tom likes to boast to his teachers then," Harry answered, before quieting to allow Remus to go on.

"Hermione, your job will be to learn whatever you can as you fly in and out of Hogwarts, so start honing your skills as best you can," Remus told her. "I think Pansy will need to discover who is true to Tom out of the pupils and who is being forced. I know this won't be easy outside of Slytherin for her, but she'll have to do the best she can."

"What about me?" Padma asked, feeling more than a little impotent. "If I take my exams this weekend I'll have plenty of spare time on my hands."

"As well as coaching the others with their spellwork, you, Emily and Luna can begin to trawl through Luna's mother's books on her inventions and potions; there may well be things that can help us," Remus said, before he turned to the remaining children. "And you lot will begin to search the library here for anything that can help us."

"What sort of things?" Parvati asked.

Hermione jumped in before Remus could answer. "Tracking spells, attack spells..."

Remus in turn interrupted her. "I'll provide you with a list of the sort of things I'm looking for. And just so you know, I'm not talking about everyday Light spells... we're going to have fight fire with fire."

"Remus," Luna interjected before anyone could respond to the comment, her mind still on the many other problems that existed. "Now that Harry is known to Tom, what if Tom wants to summon him? Harry hasn't got a real Dark Mark."

"I think we should talk to Narcissa about it," Sirius suggested.

However, when they did a few days later, Narcissa had no suggestions as to a possible answer, and it was Pansy who excitedly came up with the solution. "I know how to get around it. Before I took the Dark Mark Mum provided me with a magical ring, and she linked it to Tom by use of a spell." She then deflated just as quickly. "But I don't know what the spell is. She simply gave me the ring to wear."

Remus rubbed his chin in thought. "It must be another form of the bastardized Protean charm but with an additional link-in spell. However, I couldn't see it lasting for very long. I know that the Unspeakables tried something similar to identify ourselves with but after two or three tries, dependent upon the individual, they eventually weren't effective."

"That's why I had to take the Dark Mark," Pansy said. "But it still doesn't help us with the problem of Harry."

"Then our first task is to tie a ring into Tom," Remus decided. "It wouldn't be my first choice but everything will be for nothing if something happened and your cover was blown."

It was Emily who found the spell, buried at the back of an old book on soul curses. "I think I have it. It's a spell to temporarily bind an object to one's soul."

Remus reviewed what was written in the book, barely able to make everything out as the writing was so old and the spell handwritten. "It can be used to bind an object, a person, or both to another person other than the caster. It gives one word but the first one is completely faded. It does say, however, that the person's name is the final part of the spell."

Parvati thought about what the first word could be. "The book might have given something different, but Tom and Voldemort both use

'Morsmordre', and so did Sirius when he created Harry's Dark Mark. Perhaps the missing word is Morsmordre."

Remus flashed Parvati a smile, aware that the girl sometimes felt overshadowed by her sister, Hermione and Luna, and since she had joined them, Emily. "That's excellent deductive reasoning, Parvati, and I agree."

"Then we'd better do it," Harry declared.

Hermione slipped off a gold chain she was wearing. "Use this."

"Everybody shield themselves in case something goes wrong," Sirius said, as he took the chain and placed it on the table. Satisfied that everyone was shielding, he incanted the curse. "Morsmordre Concateno Tom Marvolo Riddle."

The words were barely out of his mouth when Sirius felt a shield go up around him and he suspected that it had to have been Remus who had done so. However, all that happened was that the necklace glowed black and then red, before reverting to gold once more.

Harry stared at it, not entirely sure if he wanted to touch it or not. "Do you think it worked?"

"Perhaps I'd better try it on first," Remus suggested.

Pansy immediately stopped him. "Only Tom will be able to take the ring off until the charm fails."

Luna stunned every by reaching out to grab the necklace and it was only Sirius' quick thinking of summoning the chain that stopped her. He then turned angrily on the young girl. "Just what the bloody hell do you think you're doing?"

"Testing it out," Luna said. "I'm the least important here."

Remus put her right. "Nobody here is more or less important than anyone else. We all contribute something and I don't want you thinking that because you're still uncertain of your magical potential that you're nothing, Luna."

"You really care that much about me?"

"I care about everyone," Remus said vehemently, before he turned to Sirius. "Thank you for..." His words died away as Sirius slipped the necklace over his head. "Sirius, are you out of your tiny mind?"

"Harry needs my support," Sirius told him. "And Tom has already seen me and knows my name. If it comes down to the wire, then I'm going to be there to help Harry. He's my godson and I'm not going to leave him alone to face this if I can possibly be there for him."

"That might be so, but you're still a bloody liability." Remus reached out to take the necklace off Sirius, only to discover he was unable to do so. "I think we can safely say it worked." He glared at Sirius. "You really are the limit sometimes."

Sirius simply shrugged. "I know, and don't worry, I'll swear an oath that will kill me if Tom does find out who I am."

"I thought we'd ascertained you can't kill yourself," Hermione pointed out.

"An oath would be different," Remus said. "He wouldn't be killing himself deliberately."

"And he won't be making it!" Harry said before Remus could say anything else. "Instead he can swear an oath that if Tom has got to him, that he'll come back here and paint a wall red or something. At least then we'll know there's a problem."

Sirius squeezed Harry's shoulder. "Then I'll do that then." He shot a quick look at his best friend. "Remus?"

"It will have to do," Remus said, although it was obvious he was far from happy with his friend's stupid action. He turned his back on Sirius to face Pansy. "How long does the charm last?"

"About six to eight months," Pansy said, before explaining the difference in time. "Daphne had the same ring as I did and I know hers lasted six months and mine eight."

"Perhaps it's linked into how strong you are magically," Padma theorized. "And maybe it will come off Sirius quicker."

Sirius winced. "The last time I was measured on the Magus scale I came in at two hundred and fifty-six. I'm powerful, even for a pure-blood."

"If that's true, it will also mean that Harry will be linked to Tom for even longer than Sirius," Hermione said worriedly, chewing her lip.

"It's a risk we have to take," Harry said, his glance flitting over Remus. "You've already said if we don't, we might end up living in exile under Tom's rule."

Everyone fell silent until Emily slipped off a silver filigree ring. "Use this, Harry. It will resize to fit you."

Remus took it and repeated the spell. Harry then took a deep breath and slid the ring onto his pinky finger on his right hand, before tugging gently at it. "It's on and it's not coming off. Now we just wait."

28th August 1997

Remus was teaching a shielding spell to everyone in the dueling room when Harry gasped at the same time as Pansy.

"My ring is burning."

"Then we have to get our masks and go," Pansy said, thankful she had chosen that day to visit.

After they had done so, Harry cleared his mind and concentrated on the ring as Pansy had told him to, before vanishing with Pansy.

When he opened his eyes, he discovered he was in a small room, and all round him, others were appearing. Harry followed them into what appeared to be a huge ballroom and he noticed that at the very front of the room there was a dais.

Tom walked out onto it flanked by his silver masked followers. "Good afternoon. I've called a meeting to ask for volunteers. I will be leading an attack on AusAD today and I want seventy-five volunteers for that endeavor. I also need a further fifty for an attack on Doonbridge. Obviously not all of you will return, but for those who do, I will look favorably upon them."

Harry wondered if Tom had 'asked' for volunteers previously, but he had no time to think about it as men were stepping forward. Hoping he could do something to help, Harry did the same. Once the required numbers had stepped forward, still leaving a good two hundred or so in the crowd, they were split into groups of twenty-five and allocated a leader. Harry found himself in Accredo's group, and he was told that they were going to form the vanguard. Harry had a feeling that he was now among the men that Tom had meant by his statement would not be returning. The die now cast, Harry had no choice but to take the rope that was being doled out.

AusAD, Melbourne – One day later

It was entirely obvious that the Australians had not been expecting an attack as, like the British, their Auror Division and the Ministry for Magic were in one building and currently that building was occupied by workers, civilians and Aurors alike.

Accredo began to bark out her orders, before she stepped to one side, and Harry readied himself as Aurors began to appear, some shepherding the workers and civilians towards the floos and others to attack Harry and the other Death Eaters with him. Behind Harry, as he and his team opened fire, there came the other four teams almost at once, although only two joined in the fight, the final two obviously being held in reserve.

Harry realized why all five teams had portkeyed all at once, when an alarm began to sound signaling a lockdown. Still keeping his spells low powered and non-lethal, Harry was joined by several other Death Eaters to replace the men who had begun to drop around him. Only Harry's superior strength had kept his shield operational in the face of the firepower that was being directed at them. Next to him another man was similarly able to keep up and Harry wondered who he was.

"Shit!" Harry swore as he was hit with a blasting spell knocking him to the floor, and he cursed for letting himself get distracted and, although he was now in pain from a twisted ankle, he returned his attention to the fight. "Reducto."

As the spell hit home, Harry guessed that the tide had turned in their favor as Tom joined them, and he began to move forward, shielding

and attacking simultaneously, Tom's silver-masked cohorts transitioning from onlookers to attackers as they joined him.

Then, Harry bit back another cry as, tired from defending himself from an onslaught of spells, his shield failed and a cutting spell hit him in the arm.

"Temporalis contego," a voice rang out, and a field dressing covered Harry's arm.

"Thanks," Harry bit out as he moved into position behind the main group as they began to make headway into main corridor that snaked through the Australian Ministry, its layout making picking off targets very easy as the offices lay on either side of the huge corridor and the only way out was via the main corridor itself, which at that moment was swarming with Death Eaters.

Again the man next to him spoke to him. "Just shield until you get your breath back."

Taking the stranger's advice, Harry resorted to simply shielding and not returning fire, and was able to recover himself a little by the time they reached their final destination...

After the battle against those Aurors who had stayed to defend their commanding officer and his team had ended in mass slaughter, only the commanding officer surviving, Tom picked out the Death Eaters who had yet to sustain an injury. Harry's arm was by now bleeding heavily, the temporary dressing having failed and he was in a great deal of pain, having taken a third hit.

Those who were uninjured headed onwards towards the Alpha site, even though Harry suspected that there would be few Aurors there, except for those off-duty or out of the building, the lockdown preventing anyone from leaving, although it had been lifted by the commanding officer when Tom threatened to slaughter every man, woman and child in the building if he refused to do so.

Harry noticed that healers were walking around providing medical help as necessary and he was more than a little relieved when it was his turn, swallowing the painkilling potion gratefully, after having tapped his mask to allow him to do so, having been warned to keep his mask on. His arm was then healed and he was given a salve.

Once everyone had been healed, Tom gave out orders to the group who had survived the initial attack but had been injured. "We will be transporting the female Aurors who remain alive to Azkaban, the same goes for the female civilian population. The children will be released. If any of the men resist, then kill them, otherwise they should be shipped off to Doonbridge." He pointed to Harry and the six men who sat around him. "You will deal with the children while I extract the information I require. The children are being kept in room 24A. The front doors will be unlocked but only for the next five minutes."

Harry rose to his feet and he headed for the room, which was quite large and full of weeping children, some of who began to scream in fear at the sight of the white-masked men returning. "Please come with us."

"Are you going to kill us?" A taller girl, who had to be about fourteen, asked.

Harry, who found himself spokesperson, shook his head. "We're taking you to safety."

"I want my mummy," a little boy wailed.

Harry scooped him up. "Mummy will be gone for a while but she'll be back later."

"I don't believe you," the tall girl said.

The man next to Harry spoke up and Harry recognized his voice as the man who had aided him during the fight.

"It doesn't make any difference what you believe, but if you want to live, you'll do as you're told and come with us."

Harry had no idea of whether the man had any intention of hurting any of the children or not but his words had had the effect he intended and, one by one, the children began to rise, clinging to each other as they were led past bodies of fallen Aurors and Death Eaters alike. Thankfully none of the bodies belonged to any of their parents and soon they stood at a large set of glass doors, beyond which Harry could see a tree-lined avenue.

He flicked his wand at the doors and they opened. "Hurry on out."

There were a few passersby, none of whom had been aware of the attack on the Ministry, although some had been dismayed to find the doors locked. Now their attention was caught as the children emerged into the bright sunlight and they hurried to meet them. Before they could do anything, however, Harry closed the doors and locked them, although he suspected that a lock more efficient than his own would soon fall back into place.

Up ahead, Harry could hear the screams of a woman, and he suspected that the location of Doonbridge was being extracted by means of blackmail. By the time they reached the room, the screams had faded to soft sobs, the uninjured and additional fifty men had gone and Harry presumed that Tom had what he wanted.

The Next Night – Potter Place

Harry apparated directly into his bedroom to discover Luna and Hermione asleep in his bed. He walked over to the bed and gently shook Hermione. "Hermione?"

Hermione gave a cry of joy as she blearily opened her eyes. "Harry, you're safe. Is Sirius with you?"

"Sirius?" Harry asked in confusion.

"He's missing as well," Hermione informed him.

Harry promptly vanished and let out a sigh of relief as he found Sirius downstairs in the study, a glass of Scotch in his hand. "You were there?"

"Yes," Sirius said, running a hand over his face, his tiredness obvious.

Harry asked, "Where were you?"

"The vanguard," Sirius revealed.

"Did you help me?"

"Yes," Sirius said. "I didn't think you'd recognized me."

Harry was absolutely flabbergasted to learn that it had been Sirius with whom he had been fighting, never having heard him speak from behind his mask before, the mask altering Sirius' voice. He had also never seen Sirius move so effortlessly before. "I've never seen you fight like that before."

"I was fighting for my life," Sirius responded. "As were you, although you did make some mistakes. How is your arm?"

"Sore but it will be okay," Harry said, before sitting down. "Did you get injured?"

"I took a slashing curse to my leg, but like you I'll be fine," Sirius answered, pouring himself a second glass of Scotch. "What on earth possessed you to volunteer?"

"I wanted to try and help anyone I could," Harry said, sitting on the edge of the desk. "But I couldn't save anyone." He then turned the question on Sirius. "Why did you?"

"Because I knew you had," Sirius said, pointing to Harry's hand. "Emily's ring is very unusual and it's how I knew it was you behind the mask."

Harry held out his shaking hand. "Can I try that?"

Sirius passed over the glass and got up to get himself a fresh one. "It takes a little getting used to."

Harry spluttered a little with his first sip but the second slug went down easier. "You said I made some mistakes..."

Sirius promptly filled Harry in on what he should have done, although he admitted that Harry had done well considering his inexperience. "Then again, I'm hoping you won't ever have to go through anything like that again."

"So am I," Harry admitted, the whole experience having completely unnerved him. "But if I do, I want to be able to fight as well as you do. You were really amazing."

"I've always been more than a little good at dueling," Sirius told him, although not to boast. "And that translates into how I fight. I could teach you a few extra moves but I can't teach fluidity; that has to come with practice and innate talent."

"Then I think we should get some practice," Harry said enthusiastically.

"Fine but not tonight," Sirius said, rising to his feet. "I don't know about you but I'm shattered."

When Harry reached his rooms, he told both girls he'd talk to them after he'd showered.

When Harry came out of the shower in his pajama bottoms, Hermione was still awake, after letting Remus know that Harry had made it back safely, neither of them having thought to do so, and as Luna was asleep, Harry kept his voice at a whisper. "I don't mind but what is Luna doing in here?"

"I was upset and so she stayed with me," Hermione whispered back as she curled up to Harry's back. "You may as well get used to it. We're going to be sharing a room like this with Pansy at Hogwarts."

Harry was about to point out that he fully intended to sleep on the sofa when they were there, when Hermione's hand snuck around his stomach and slid into his pajama bottoms. "Hermione!"

"Go to sleep," Hermione told him, tightening her grip and snuggling closer.

It was a long time later that Harry fell asleep, Hermione's hold on him making it difficult although she herself had nodded off more or less immediately.

The next morning Remus was dismayed but not surprised to hear Harry and Sirius' news, Hermione only having been able to tell him that Harry was safe and Sirius being sound asleep when Remus had checked his room. "At least we know now what he's up to, but if there's a next time I don't want either of you volunteering. You were both lucky that you were only asked to escort the children out, to say nothing of the fact that you might have died in that first attack."

"I spoke to Mother this morning," Pansy revealed to Harry. "I said I knew you had volunteered but not if you were okay. She said that she also had no idea but if you had been in the first group then only two people survived it."

"And that would be Sirius and me," Harry confirmed. "Even so, my arm was badly injured and I twisted my ankle, and Sirius took a blow to his leg."

"How many Death Eaters died?" Remus asked, not really wanting to think about how close Harry and Sirius had come to dying.

"Quite a few," Harry told him. "About thirty-five died in the first attack and a further ten in the attack on the Alpha site. Apparently no-one from Auror Division made it to the Beta site so no-one was lost there."

"Merlin!" Remus exclaimed, shaking his head. "He didn't mind sacrificing his men to get what he wanted."

"As far as I could figure out, there were twelve female Aurors who survived the initial attack and about twenty civilian women," Sirius said. "They've all been transported to Azkaban but as I said, the men who didn't resist were sent to Doonbridge."

Justin remarked on both men's demeanor. "You both seem to be quite calm about what happened."

In truth, Harry felt numb and he still didn't feel as what he done and witnessed was real. "It still doesn't feel real to be honest."

"And this isn't the first time I've seen action," Sirius reminded Justin. "I was part of the first war if you remember."

"Did you use Dark Arts spells?" Luna asked.

"We both did," Harry confirmed. "We'd have been dead just using Light spells."

Remus reminded Harry of what he already warned him about. "Fine but don't make a habit of it. You're going to have enough to contend with teaching the class and you'll become addicted to the Dark Arts."

Pansy had already gone withdrawal previously and she shuddered. "And believe me going through withdrawal isn't nice."

Hermione tightened her grip on Harry's hand as she sat next to him. "Then we need to find another way."

Harry disagreed. "There is no other way, Hermione. I have to do this."

"Harry's right," Pansy said as she flashed Hermione an apologetic look for backing Harry up. "Fate dealt us a winning hand when Malfoy challenged Harry and it gave us a way in, a way we would never have had otherwise. It's a way that not even I could have provided despite who my mother is."

Remus added to Pansy's remarks. "Harry's addiction will need to be counteracted as it grows but it's also another reason why I wanted Hermione to join you in Hogwarts. She's Harry's anchor." He then went on. "But, Harry, as hard as it will be, you need to limit your Dark Arts activities if you can. You too, Pansy."

"That really is easier said than done," Pansy responded. "But I'll do my best."

"And I'll try and take up some of the slack for him when I can," Sirius offered.

"Even you're not infallible," Remus said, completely unaware that Sirius wouldn't be affected. "So the same goes for you. Limit your activities."

"Yes, Sir," Sirius said as he saluted before getting up. "I'm afraid though I have to go to work. I'll see you in the morning."

Next Chapter: Pansy suggests Harry take a mistress. Sirius gets closer to Tom.

Chapter 62: Breakthrough

20th October 1997

Harry sat at the head table watching the various students on each table eating breakfast. He could see Pansy sitting with Tracy Davis, the two girls deep in conversation, but Harry had no idea what about. He stirred as he realized that Severus had addressed him, Harry's mind on the group's lack of progress or ideas to move things forward. "Severus, I'm sorry, I was miles away."

Severus looked over to the Slytherin table and reached the wrong conclusion. "You're quite taken with Parkinson, aren't you?"

Harry wanted to tell Severus to mind his own business, but instead he adopted a pleasant smile. "She's an interesting girl."

"You intend to marry her?" Severus asked, as he was well aware that Genevieve Parkinson would likely agree to the match if Harry did.

"It's a little early in the relationship to decide that, but the possibility is there," Harry countered, just as aware that Genevieve looked upon him favorably, particularly after his survival at AusAD, and he was also aware that she was also listening in on their conversation. "After Malfoy's treatment of Pansy, she wants to be sure of the person with whom she's going to end up."

Severus' attention drifted over to his godson. "Speaking of Draco, he's complained to me that you keep using him as a guinea pig in class."

"And I'll continue to do so until his performance improves," Harry remarked, well aware that he was deliberately picking on Draco. "At the moment he's little better than a first year."

"So it has nothing to do with his treatment of Parkinson?"

"Of course it does," Harry admitted. "But he still isn't the hotshot he thinks he is."

Severus had to agree with Harry. "His marks have slipped from last year, except in Transfiguration."

Harry was hardly surprised to hear that. "Well, when they pick up again, maybe I'll stop picking on him."

Severus had done as he had promised Draco he would and spoken to Draco's tormentor. "Very well, Gareth. I'll let you get back to your breakfast."

Harry wondered what Severus would think if he knew to whom he was really speaking. He hid a cold smile at the thought, before sighing and picking up his papers. "Actually, I'd better head out. I need to prepare for my class."

Severus inclined his head, and then turned to speak to Aurora Sinistra, who had accepted her fate and was continuing in her role as deputy, mostly in the hope that she could do something to help her students.

When Harry reached the defense classroom, he put a sock out on every desk. The spell he was about to teach the class was not particularly pleasant, but it was on the curriculum drawn up by Tom, and Harry had little choice but to teach it.

He was glad that Sirius had actually covered this spell with him, as Harry had shown Sirius Tom's newly revised curriculum and Sirius had been able to set up a schedule for them to practice each of the spells before the school year began. Even though Harry had initially baulked at the idea, Sirius had made him practice on animals, reminding Harry of what he had gone through in Draco's place and that it was likely the spell might need to be used against a student. However, when Harry's eyes had reached the point of changing to black, Sirius had ended the lesson.

When the students arrived twenty minutes later, Harry could see the disparaging looks on some of their faces at the sight of the sock. He waited until everyone was seated before flicking his wand at the door and closing it. "Today we're going to perform a spell that is a common household spell."

Draco's lip curled up in disdain. "I thought this was a Dark Arts class."

"Ten points from Slytherin and a word of warning, Malfoy," Harry immediately said, rather enjoying the feeling of lording it over the Slytherin. "You really don't want to be the person used to demonstrate the spell I'm about to show you."

As Blaise kicked him under the table, Draco subsided and dutifully let Harry continue.

"As I was saying, this spell is still used in homes everywhere but might well be considered a Dark Spell because of the damage it can do if not used in the proper manner..."

During the course of the lesson Harry had to step in twice to save Seamus' cat, earning Seamus and Terry Boot four nights detention and the loss of twenty points each. Eventually, Harry called a stop to the lesson.

"Replace your cats in their cages. Your homework is to track down five similar household spells for me and to then give me one example each of a real life application and a more sinister application for the spell. Due to the nature of this homework, I will give you two weeks to complete it."

"Two weeks?" Draco echoed mockingly.

"It's not as easy as you might believe, Malfoy," Harry said, Remus having assured him that it would take a good deal of research by the students. "And, as an added incentive to finish on time, I'll be performing today's spell on the student with the lowest mark and/or the one or ones who fail to hand in the homework completed to my satisfaction. Do you understand?"

Draco nodded. "Yes, Professor."

Harry knew his unspoken message had gotten through to Draco. He therefore issued a final warning. "Before you go, should any of you try this spell outside of this room then I will arrange for the entire class to practice on you the next time we meet. Dismissed."

The moment the classroom door closed, Harry locked it and then he collapsed shaking onto the nearest chair. He knew only too well that if he hadn't taken a calming potion before the class had started, he would never have gotten through it. But it was not the grisliness of

the spell that was bothering Harry, it was that it had felt far too comfortable teaching it. He had felt similarly dismayed when he had easily mastered the spell when Sirius had been teaching it to him.

Hermione dropped out of her Animagus form the instant Harry closed the bedroom door. "You don't look so good."

"I'm fine," Harry said, taking Hermione into his arms, before making an excuse when she gave him a look that said she didn't believe him. "Just like Remus, I really don't think I'm cut out for this teaching lark, at least not teaching the sort of spells I am."

Hermione could hear the worry in Harry's voice. "Did casting the spell affect you badly?"

"It's not one I particularly want to cast again nor did I get a rush out of using it," Harry told her, aware that Hermione had been told by Remus to monitor Harry's feelings as he used various spells, and so he had lied to her, hating that he was having to do so.

"Did you assign the homework?" Hermione asked, drawing Harry down on the bed to lie with her.

"Yes," Harry told her. "That was a brilliant idea from Remus. It means I don't have to mark homework for a while, and..."

"I mark your homework," Hermione reminded him as she snuggled closer. "And I also help plan your lessons as does Remus." Feeling Harry react to her, she gave him a slightly wicked smile. "Do you want to think about something other than the Dark Arts?"

Rather than answering verbally, Harry instead tapped his ring before cupping the back of Hermione's head, his mouth moving to cover hers. They had gotten used to these brief moments where they could be together, Pansy deliberately staying in the library to give them time alone, and now they used the time to their best advantage, quickly shedding their clothing between kisses.

Harry's sojourn was ended by a knock on the outer door to his rooms. He rolled off Hermione. "Change." More than a little annoyed, he dragged on a dressing gown, tapped his ring to change his appearance and headed out of his bedroom. He raised an eyebrow

when he discovered Genevieve Parkinson standing there. "Good evening."

Genevieve took in Harry's appearance and she frowned. "I do hope I'm not disturbing anything."

Her meaning was evident, and Harry shook his head as he walked back into his rooms. "No, you're not. I had a sleepless night and was trying to catch up." He opened wide his bedroom door to reveal that apart from his rumpled side, there was no-one else in the room. "I'll get dressed if you need to talk."

Even though Genevieve believed her daughter was happy with this man, she also found herself worrying that Gareth might not be as decent as he first appeared. "Don't bother. It's just a quick one. It's about the detentions you assigned Finnigan. I can't stand the boy. Would you mind taking them?"

"I assigned them with you because you put the fear of Tom into Finnigan," Harry said, mangling a Muggle saying to suit his purpose.

Genevieve's lip twitched. "I know but even I get fed of Finnigan's whimpering efforts."

"Take the detentions that you assigned Malfoy with me and I'll consider us even," Harry said, dropping onto his sofa.

"You have a deal," Genevieve responded. "Goodnight, Gareth."

Genevieve made her way to the door, and she was about to open it when Pansy did so and came in. "Mother?"

"I was just asking Gareth for a favor," Genevieve told her daughter, before she swept out of the room.

Once she had shut the door, Pansy turned worriedly to Harry. "Please tell me she wasn't here to talk engagements."

Harry had half expected Pansy to assume something totally different, especially given his state of undress. "Don't panic. She was here to once again ask if I'd take Finnigan's detentions, so I exchanged them for Malfoy's."

"Mother will take him apart again," Pansy quite rightly stated, before she went on to discuss the lesson that day. "I was surprised when you didn't use Draco for the example this morning."

"I admitted to Snape that I'd been picking on Malfoy and I had," Harry said, before sighing. "And as thankfully I was able to avoid using anyone as an example today or wanting to do so, it means that I'm not falling from grace as quickly as I thought I might be."

As he had with Hermione, Harry had lied to Pansy, feeling more than a little guilty that he was doing so, but he knew that she too wouldn't hesitate to report to Remus, and Harry had decided that he couldn't back off from his training, which was exactly what would happen if Remus knew.

"At least you only had to cast the spell once," Pansy reminded him.

Harry countered her point of view. "Actually, you're forgetting that I had to practice it again and again with Sirius when I was first learning to cast it."

"I did forget." Pansy then looked round the room and spotted the empty perch. "Where's Hermione?"

Harry nodded towards the window. "She's out flying."

"She loves her form, doesn't she?" Pansy asked a little jealously, although she already knew the answer.

"I'm sorry you don't have one," Harry said sympathetically. "Would you like to go flying with me?"

"It's dark and we don't have Hermione's vision," Pansy reminded Harry.

Harry had failed to notice. "In that case I'll go shower."

22nd November 1997

Harry glanced over at Pansy as a knock sounded on the door to their rooms. "Make sure that you hang out the curtain so Hermione will know someone is here if she returns."

Pansy scowled at Harry. "I know, I know."

Harry gave Pansy a rueful smile. "Sorry, I just feel on edge today."

"I noticed," Pansy said as she hurried to do as Harry asked, before closing the bedroom door.

Harry opened his door to discover Genevieve there. "Come in."

"Good evening, Pansy," Genevieve greeted her daughter, who she had to admit looked well and content and was now a very different girl than she had been when she had been with Draco.

"Good evening, Mother," Pansy returned the greeting before moving to sit down next to Harry, who put his arm around her. "How are you?"

"I'm very well," Genevieve sat down as Harry waved his hand towards the chair closest to the fireplace. "I've come here to ask Gareth for a favor."

"Two in two days?" Harry asked, having once again swapped detentions with Genevieve, who couldn't stand Seamus and rather liked tormenting Draco.

Genevieve smiled. "Yes. It's about a dinner I need to attend in two weeks' time. I need a dinner partner and I was hoping you would agree to attend with me."

Pansy frowned. "Why can't you go with Daddy?"

"Because I also need a dueling partner and your father will refuse to attend such an evening," Genevieve informed her daughter, before she looked pointedly at Harry. "I'm going to be honest with you, Gareth. I'm Accredo, and it's as her partner that you will be attending, if my daughter doesn't mind of course."

Pansy shrugged. "I don't own Gareth, Mother. Is this to be a show duel?"

"Yes," Genevieve said. "So although you can't attend the dinner, you will be expected to attend the after party." She again looked

pointedly at Harry. "And speaking about that, I was wondering if you intend to limit your attentions to my daughter alone."

Harry's stomach began to go over. "It's to be a revel?"

Genevieve nodded. "Tom believes that his men deserve a treat for their efforts and so the female prisoners will be handed over to them after the show duels."

Pansy tightened her grip on Harry's leg. "I'm not sure I want to see that."

"Everyone is expected to attend, no exceptions," Genevieve said firmly. "However, the winners will have rooms they can use." She looked expectantly at Harry. "Are we agreed?"

Harry jumped at the offer. "We are, thank you."

"Then that's settled," Genevieve said, getting to her feet.

Pansy stopped her mother from leaving. "If there are no exceptions, are you going to be unfaithful to Daddy?"

"No," Genevieve said instantly. "I should have explained better. While attendance is compulsory at least for the dueling, taking part in the baser side of the revel is not," Genevieve revealed, as this would be Pansy's first time in attendance. "There will likely be further dueling, gambling and general partying. The female companionship is something that is being offered as a sweetener."

Pansy grimaced, her disgust showing. "How can you sit back and let it happen?"

Genevieve knew why her daughter was so upset. "Because I have no choice, but Tom did agree to a change in things at my behest."

Harry was now curious. "What sort of change?"

"If any of the men want to keep the women rather than discarding them or sending them back to Azkaban after they have finished, then they may," Genevieve told Harry. "I admit they will still be prisoners but their living conditions will improve if they agree to this."

Pansy began to dig deeper. "Where are these women going to be kept?"

"It's up to the individual in question to make arrangements – they can either pay to house them in the building where the revel is taking place or, if they reside in a stronghold such as Hogwarts, then they can bring them back here," Genevieve said. "I believe Argentus has his eye on one who he intends to place in his rooms at Laurifer House."

"And his wife doesn't mind, or doesn't he have one?" Pansy asked.

"She won't have a lot of say in the matter. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm afraid I must be getting on." Genevieve then rose to her feet and left, Pansy politely escorting her mother to the door.

When Pansy turned back she found Harry was looking askance at her. "What?"

"We can't rescue them, Pansy," Harry warned, aware that this latest information had been far from welcomed by his friend.

"No, but you may be able to rescue one," Pansy said as she sat down. "Harry, I think that it's time you took a mistress."

Harry's eyebrows rose in shock. "What?"

Pansy grinned at his shocked look. "You and Sirius are obviously going to be among the winners and you can use the rooms Mother mentioned to 'entertain' a pretty young lady. Then, after you explain the situation to whoever you pick, we can install her here."

Harry mulled over the idea. "It's already pretty crowded with the three of us without adding another woman to the mix."

"Then I have a better idea."

"Go on."

"It's obvious that quite a few of these women are going to be former Aurors. So, if they're going to put all of these women in one house, wouldn't it better to find out where it is and maybe slowly build up Auror Division from the inside," Pansy suggested. "Obviously we'll

need to make sure that we can trust these women but it might be the something that we've been waiting for."

As he had when he had first talked to her, Harry again personally thought that Pansy was cleverer than he had ever given her credit for, and after agreeing with her, together they waited for Hermione to return from delivering the weekly update to Remus to fill her in on their plan, although Harry knew he wouldn't see much of his girlfriend as she would again have to return to pass on their idea. However, their idea didn't go quite as they thought it would.

8th December 1997

"Do you yield?" Still breathing evenly, a seemingly relaxed Sirius stood and held his wand over a panting and exhausted Harry.

Harry was not only worn out but also in a great deal of pain. He therefore happily gave in. "I do."

Sirius held out his hand and helped Harry to his feet, before both men walked over to Tom, Harry more limping than walking, and bowed.

Tom smiled at them before moving to stand before Sirius. "Wait here while I deal with your opponent." Tom then turned to Harry. "You fought well and if you so wish to take a partner tonight then you may have the first pick from any of the women here."

Harry glanced over at Sirius, who had been planning to do the same as Harry. "But I lost. It should be my friend's victory."

"I have other plans for your friend," Tom said, although he was pleased that Harry had give Sirius full credit.

Harry now accepted his due and inclined his head. "Then thank you, my Lord." He made his way to the holding pens, glad that his mask hid his disgust at the way the women were dressed and caged. He stopped in front of a familiar face and pointed at her. "This one."

The woman glared at Harry. "I hope you're ready for a beating."

"Are you sure you want her?" Tom asked.

Harry merely laughed. "I prefer a woman with a bit of fire."

"As one of the finalists, you may take one of the suites on the top floor," Tom informed him.

Harry ignored the insults that were now being heaped upon him from the cage and he stunned the girl inside the cage and opened it up before floating her out. "If you'll excuse me."

Once Harry had left, Tom told those remaining about the arrangements he had put in place before ordering Sirius to come with him. Once inside his rooms, Tom ordered Sirius to remove his mask. "Sit down."

Sirius did as he was told before asking, "How may I be of service, my Lord?"

"I looked you up, Blackwell," Tom informed him. "And since I lost my personal healer during the recent attack I led on Spain last week, I'm considering you to take his place. You seem more than capable of taking care of yourself, as your display tonight proved. You are also levelheaded and not easy to faze. I therefore have a few 'volunteers' that I would like you to heal."

Just Tom had put Harry through his paces with the Dark Arts, Sirius was also put through something similar, being asked to heal the Death Eaters who had been the first part of the night's entertainment; Death Eaters who had all betrayed Tom and had paid for it with a brutal demonstration.

Sirius managed to heal everyone until he finally had to admit defeat when he reached a werewolf who had been tortured using silver nitrate. "He's too far gone."

"Then deal with him," Tom demanded.

Sirius turned his wand on the pitiful mess and said quietly, "Avada Kedavra."

"That didn't take much effort for you," Tom noted, before asking an important question. "How powerful are you?"

"I register at about two hundred and fifty," Sirius said, deciding he shouldn't lie. "It's the only reason I believe I made it through the day at AusAD."

"I didn't know you were there," Tom said truthfully, not having any idea who had been behind the masks, nor had he really cared.

"I was in the vanguard with Gareth," Sirius revealed.

"One of our only two survivors in that group," Tom remarked. "I should have guessed. Tell me, how do you know Edwards?"

"We shared the same tutor growing up," Sirius said, glad that he and Harry looked of a similar age courtesy of their disguises. "Although I am, of course, the better dueler."

Tom laughed at Sirius' cockiness, although it was far from an empty boast. "That much was evident from this evening, but you might want to take care, Gareth is rather powerful."

"Gareth is powerful," Sirius acknowledged. "But power isn't everything, although I'm sure you probably might not agree."

"Actually I do," Tom said as he contemplated Sirius. "However, most people would be too afraid to express that sort of opinion in my presence."

"I'm not most people, my Lord," Sirius answered, although he took care not to inject any trace of arrogance in his voice this time, keeping his manner and tone deferential.

Tom, of course, noticed this but he didn't expect any less from those he surrounded himself with. "No, you're not." He had no intention of rejoining his men and he therefore made a suggestion to Sirius. "Perhaps you would care to join me for a game of chess."

"I could hardly refuse such a kind invitation," Sirius said, his mind awhirl with how congenial Tom was being, although Sirius didn't believe for one minute that Tom wouldn't drop the act if Sirius crossed the line and managed to anger him, "although I should warn you that I am rather good at it."

"As am I," Tom said and he led the way back to his rooms, summoning a house elf to fetch drinks for them.

And it was playing chess that Severus found them, laughing over a shared joke.

Sirius had to hide his smile as he saw Severus' fists tighten momentarily. He was only too well aware by now from Harry that Severus believed himself to be best friends with Tom. Sirius did, however, rise to his feet. "Acerbus, good evening again." Sirius had had the pleasure of watching Harry wipe the floor with Severus before Harry had had to face Sirius in the final.

Severus inclined his head, before addressing Tom. "My Lord, I'm sorry to intrude but you did ask me to remind you of the time."

Tom glanced at his wall clock. "So I did." He turned to Sirius. "You will excuse me. I'd offer to continue our game at a later time but I can see I would have lost in two moves."

Sirius slipped his mask back on, this time his smile spreading across his face now that it was hidden. "You were still an excellent opponent, my Lord."

Tom acknowledged Sirius' compliment as up until that moment the match could have gone either way. "Thank you. You made the game demanding, so perhaps we could play again sometime."

Sirius felt rather than saw Severus tense up and, he relished the moment, bowing low to Tom and accepting. "I would like that very much, my Lord."

"Then at some point we'll have a rematch. For the moment, though, you may return home," Tom told him. "I doubt you want the leftovers that might still be available."

"You guessed correctly, my Lord," Sirius said and he inclined his head in both men's directions before leisurely strolling out.

Tom told Severus to close the door and that he could unmask. "You seem rather tense, Severus."

"There's something about him I don't like," Severus said in a faintly distrustful manner.

"Personally I like him very much. He's affable, erudite and droll," Tom responded, well aware that his comments would irritate Severus, who he sometimes thought got above his station. "And he's a challenge when it comes to playing chess."

Severus knew there had to be more to it than simple chess skills. "Are you going to ask him to replace Arabella?"

Tom had not entertained the idea until that moment. "Of course not. I barely know him although his background checks out. I wanted to see how well he performed doing the job he's supposedly trained for."

Now Severus understood why Sirius had been asked to join Tom. "You're thinking of asking him to act as your medical advisor?"

"Yes," Tom confirmed before bringing up the circle again. "I was actually thinking of asking Edwards to replace Arabella."

Even though he didn't like Gareth that much, Severus definitely preferred this idea. "I think he would make an excellent replacement, my Lord."

Tom hid his smile at Severus' submissive tone of address and deigned to share his thoughts. "Now that I've met Blackwell, I might well change my mind. Edwards is an excellent dueler, skilled at the Dark Arts and dating Genevieve's daughter but I find him a little cold and unapproachable. Maybe I'm looking at too narrow a field to replace Arabella. Do you have any other suggestions?"

"What about Draco?"

Tom's face took on a look of disgust. "I'd invite Greyback to join me before I ever asked Lucius' brat."

"Then how about Magnus?"

"A fair choice but I'm going to think about my options," Tom said, not feeling any particularly rush to replace Arabella, who was currently

pregnant. He then changed the subject. "So, as you've reminded me about the time, is my guest waiting for me in my bedroom?"

"She is," Severus confirmed.

"Then I'll let you return to your own partner," Tom said as he headed for the double doors that lead to the master suite. "Goodnight."

Severus inclined his head and stormed off to his rooms where his partner for the evening was waiting for him. She immediately discerned something was wrong. "You look unhappy."

"It's nothing with which to concern you," Severus snapped, before barking out an order. "Get undressed and get into bed."

Used to Severus' demands by now, his partner did as he demanded and resigned herself to her fate.

Further along the corridor, Harry's choice of partner for the evening had finally finished bathing, trying to put off what she knew was to come. She was surprised that her captor had let her dally first in the shower and then in the bath for so long. However, she hid her fear as she re-entered the bedroom, holding close to her body the robe she had been given to put on. "I'm not going to make this easy for you."

His wand drawn in case she decided to attack him and make a break for it, Harry pointed to the chair and said, "Sit down."

The woman was rather surprised by Harry's next question.

"Are you hungry?"

She nodded. "Starving."

Harry snapped his fingers and Ludwig, Harry's personal house-elf he had acquired on joining Hogwarts, popped into existence with a large basket and several bottles of wine before it vanished.

Harry opened the basket. "This is for you."

The woman watched in shock as Harry passed her a sandwich and then poured out a glass of water. He also set a bottle of the wine on the cupboard behind him.

"When did you last eat?"

"Two days ago," the woman said as she tucked into a roast beef sandwich. "But it was hardly what you'd call food." After finishing the sandwich, the woman looked charily at Harry. "I'm full, but I'd like a glass of red wine."

"Auror Jameson, feel free to help yourself to anything you want," Harry said, aware that he had surprised her.

Anna was now even more wary of Harry's motives. "So you knew who I was when you picked me?"

"Yes. I'm just sorry I was only able to pick one woman," Harry told her as he handed her a glass of red wine. He realized he had said the wrong thing when Anna visibly tensed. "That didn't come out quite how I meant it. Please, try the wine."

Although her stomach was bouncing around at Harry's rather disturbing comment, Anna tried the red wine, gulping down quite a bit of it.

Harry wondered if she was thirsty. "Would you like some more?"

Anna decided if she was going to have to have sex with Harry, then she'd rather be doing it drunk and so she held out her glass. "Please." Since Harry was being so affable and was smiling as he topped off her glass, Anna decided to push her luck and she glanced hopefully at the basket. "Will I be allowed to take any of that back to Azkaban with me?"

"You won't be going back," Harry informed her, before outlining what Tom was offering his men. "I will set you up in this room on a permanent basis."

Anna's hand tightened on the wineglass. "As your whore?"

"Good grief, no!" Harry exclaimed. "Nothing could be further from the truth."

"So you're going to treat me as a mistress instead?"

Never really having been faced with a situation like this one, instead of setting Anna's mind at ease, Harry realized he wasn't exactly explaining himself very well. He therefore tried to reassure her. "I won't be laying a finger on you. Nobody will but I'm afraid you will have to share this house with other girls who won't be afforded the same luxury."

Anna looked incredulously at Harry. "So you don't want to have sex with me?"

Harry shook his head. "No."

"Why not?" The words left Anna's mouth before she could help herself.

"Because I don't believe in rape," Harry said raising his wand and making Anna flinch. "I'm not going to hurt you, Auror Jameson. I just need you to swear an oath for me to keep whatever we discuss a secret before I say anything else."

Anna looked at Harry suspiciously not quite sure what he was up to before she held out her hand for the wand, although her response was hesitant as she didn't really understand why she was making the oath. "Okay..."

Harry passed the wand over and he watched as Anna swore an oath. "I'm surprised you didn't try to kill me and run."

"I suspect I wouldn't get very far if I did," Anna said sensibly before handing back Harry's wand. "Why did I just swear an oath?"

"Let me start by telling you that my name is Gareth Edwards," Harry said, Remus having told him that he should keep his true identity hidden until whoever Harry picked was out of the house they were currently in. "And the reason for the oath is that I'm going to help you to set up an internal Auror network."

Anna's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You're not an Auror though, are you? How do I know that you're not trying to pump me for information for that bastard?"

"You don't, so let's rectify that problem," Harry said before taking out his wand again. "I swear on my life and magic that I picked you tonight for the main purpose of rebuilding BritAD from inside of this house, that I am on your side, and that I will not reveal to Tom or any of his men anything you tell me in confidence."

Anna relaxed a little at the oath and she immediately got down to business, although she still wasn't entirely comfortable around Harry. "I suppose you've had trouble locating Aurors who didn't make it to the Alpha and Beta sites."

"I have," Harry said, helping himself to a glass of red wine now that he felt he could relax. "Is there anything you can tell me that might help me locate any? All of our searches are coming up blank."

"Our searches?"

"I'm obviously not doing this alone," Harry said. "And so I'll need your permission to relay whatever you tell me to the good guys."

"And do these good guys have a name?"

"Yes," Harry said, having had permission from Remus and Hermione to use their names. "Remus Lupin and Hermione Granger."

"That's a nice touch using Potter's girlfriend and guardian as your contacts," Anna said, still not trusting Harry. "Can you prove you really are on our side?"

Harry smiled. "I knew you wouldn't be very trusting, so Ron Weasley sent you a message..."

Anna interrupted. "How did you even know you'd be able to pick me?"

"I didn't, but I hoped it would be the case as I knew you were in Azkaban," Harry said. "And so the message is that yes, he did grow magically stronger."

"Anything else?" Anna asked, proving she wasn't entirely convinced.

"Yes," Harry said. "Your new code is nine seven three, operative code one Beta one."

Anna gasped. "But that's impossible."

Harry shook his head. "As terrible as it sounds, I'm afraid that you're the highest ranking British Auror left alive that we know about. As I just said, I've been in Azkaban and so I know that apart from a few individuals most of the women left alive are trainees. Everyone else above you didn't make it."

Anna took another large gulp of wine, before turning her gaze on Harry. "Okay, but for you to even know about that code, you would have to rank pretty highly yourself, and as I'm pretty certain you're not an Auror, that must mean you're an Unspeakable. So what's your code?"

Harry gave it freely, although he knew by doing so he was confirming that he was most definitely an Unspeakable. "Code six eleven eight, operative code one Alpha two."

Anna raised an eyebrow. "You're Ignotus' number one?"

"I am," Harry confirmed. "Although I'm afraid I can't show you my badge to confirm that."

Anna accepted this. "So if you know Remus Lupin and Hermione Granger then you must have known Harry Potter."

"Yes," Harry said uncomfortably.

"I knew him too, and even in Azkaban I heard what happened to him," Anna said sadly. "He was such a nice young man and didn't deserve to die like that."

Harry was overwhelmed with guilt at the sad look on Anna's face and he decided to throw caution to the wind, tapping his ring. "Hello, Anna."

Anna was, understandably, disbelieving. "Do you really expect me to believe you're Harry Potter?"

"I swear on my life and my magic that I am really Harry Potter."

"You little shit!" Anna exclaimed tearfully, putting down her glass of wine and punching Harry in the arm before pulling him into a hug.

Harry gave a belly laugh at Anna's comment. "I'm not so little anymore."

As she released him, Anna asked, "How on earth did you manage to end up a Death Eater and an Unspeakable for that matter?"

So Harry spent the next hour or so filling Anna in on what had happened. "I just wish I could do more."

"What you're doing is really brave," Anna said as she let him fill up her wineglass again, and feeling a lot more comfortable now she opened up. "Right, my turn. You need to know about any Aurors out there, don't you?"

Harry nodded. "Anything you can tell us will be a big help."

"Four of my team didn't make it to the Beta site, which is where I was captured. If they're not dead, then they can be found, if they're still there after this long, at a house in Chelsea – the address is 224 Bainbridge Drive. Be warned though, if they're still there, they'll have set up wards and if they feel trapped they'll probably attack. However, if you can get past that, our password was 'jimfilius', a play on my surname. Each of them will have contacts to other possible links but don't expect it to be easy."

"Then we'll wait until the summer holiday to approach them," Harry decided. "Remus might need my help."

"I could see the dueling from my cage. You were very good," Anna told Harry, "though the man who won was brilliant. But I shouldn't really be saying that about a Death Eater."

Harry smiled. "He's an Unspeakable too, so it's okay."

"You really have been busy," Anna said and she changed the subject. "So is there anything I can do once I'm holed up in this warehouse?"

Harry grimaced. "That's not a nice name."

"But for all the other women there, this house is exactly what it's going to be," Anna responded, a tear running down her cheek. "I just got very lucky, at least this time. When we were first captured..."

"You don't have to talk about it," Harry said, taking her hand.

"I need to," Anna said, taking a deep breath and going on. "I thought they'd execute us but they didn't, at least not the female Aurors and younger female staff they took from the Ministry. Instead they kept us as entertainment for the guards. And while most of us were unwilling, a few of the women have become, for want of a better word, partners to the guards. They were moved into better quarters and treated better. They're also not here tonight."

"This was something we were afraid of," Harry said, having already discussed the possibility with Remus and Sirius.

Anna had more to say. "However, there was one guard who constantly slipped us extra food but never demanded any sexual favors. He only ever did it when the guard with him was looking the other way though. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was trying to help us."

Harry debated what Anna was telling him. "Then perhaps he only accepted Tom's rule to save his skin. Who knows? But it's nice to hear that there might be someone I can trust in the prison."

"I'm still not sure I'd trust him," Anna said, before she returned to the subject of Harry's mission. "So am I right in thinking that your plan involves me trying to discover which women are loyal to Tom and which are not?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, but right now I have no idea what the set up is going to be in the house but I can only hope that you'll have free reign to walk about and fraternize with the other women, particularly as I imagine you'll need a Dark Mark to get in and out of the house, so they won't be worried about you escaping."

Anna gave him a warning. "Speaking from experience, just as they have in Azkaban, I'm afraid that some of the women will take their chances with their new benefactors, although I know I wouldn't if I was one of them. And although I know there are several Aurors and

Trainees who I believe I can trust implicitly, sadly I can't say same for the all of them. It's going to take time, Harry."

"I understand and it disgusts me that I have to ask you stand by while your friends and colleagues are being mistreating," Harry said, finding the whole idea of leaving the women in sexual servitude rather distasteful.

"I have every confidence that once you're up to speed, you'll find a way to get us all out," Anna said, believing Harry wholeheartedly. "However, in the meantime I'll start to set up a network. I'll use our old codes and the like to get messages back and forth and eventually I'll come up with a list of those who can be trusted."

"That would be most helpful."

"Harry, I know that some of the women won't be able to be trusted but what will happen to them?" Anna asked, more than a little concerned about the women's welfare despite their change in allegiance. "It's not their fault that they couldn't deal with this."

"I'll arrange for them to be obliterated and returned to their homes," Harry decided after a moment's thought, not having thought about this problem until that moment.

"And if they don't have homes to go?"

"Then I'll sort something out, but I promise they won't be hurt if I can help it," Harry said, before bringing up other prisoners. "Do you know if there are any more young women still in Azkaban?"

Anna shook her head. "We were all taken out. The only prisoners remaining are male and the older female staff from the Ministry. I saw them as we were dragged out."

"I've seen them myself," Harry revealed. "I was there when your colleagues were taken as an example just after the Ministry was overrun."

"I must be a very lucky girl," Anna said with a shudder. "I really thought they were going to take me. Only Tabitha Jenkins came back."

"Tabitha survived?" Harry asked in surprise, having left the room before she had finally cracked.

"Yes," Anna told him. "But what they did to her really broke her spirit and she's become of the women in favor with the guard... I don't think she could face being raped indiscriminately again."

"You seem to be holding up fairly well despite what's happened," Harry told her.

"There were times when I hoped I'd die in Azkaban, and if I could have found a way to do so I might well have done so," Anna admitted. "But it helps to know that there's hope again, and I know it's this that will keep the girls going in this house. I'm just sorry I can't tell all of them."

"As am I," Harry said, but he was glad that Anna had accepted the rather delicate situation. He smiled at her when she yawned. "I think you should get some sleep. Tomorrow we'll talk again."

Next Chapter: Harry turns to Sirius for guidance.

Chapter 63: The Hufflepuff Cup

6th February 1998

When Harry returned from teaching, he discovered that instead of finding Pansy alone, Hermione was there and she and Pansy were going over Pansy's homework. "I didn't expect to see you until morning."

"I thought I might as well come straight back. Everyone at home is up to date with their schooling and ready to take their exams, we've exhausted the possible spells arsenal and Remus, who got back from New York last night, said he has had no luck so far in finding any other survivors in any areas in the US."

Harry sighed. "I'm surprised that it isn't bedlam out there."

"What Remus did find out is that groups of wizards have banded together to take up the slack," Hermione told him. "Obviously they're nowhere near up to the standard of an Auror but it's at least stopping things from denigrating into complete lawlessness."

"I think Tom will move some of his men over there eventually," Harry said, having already seen Tom set up the government in the UK he had told Harry he would, including a faux Auror Division. "I'm worried though that when he does, more fighting might break out."

"Remus has spoken to some of the leaders of these vigilante groups and they know better than to take Tom on if he does," Hermione assured him. "So for the moment there's little we can do except plod along."

"It's just horribly frustrating and I don't feel as if we've achieved anything," Harry admitted, sitting down beside the girls. "Anna still can't leave her rooms and I can't exactly take the chance of visiting one of the girls she wants to talk to without risking everything if I'm discovered."

"Something will turn up," Hermione said in an encouraging voice. "Just wait and see."

It was going to be a long and frustrating wait.

25th June 1998

Harry sat down in front of the class on the edge of his desk. "For our final lesson of the year, we're going to discuss the Protractus Crucio Mortis curse. Can anyone tell me what it is?"

Draco put up his hand. "It's a combination of the Killing Curse and the Cruciatus and it will eventually kill you, although not straight away."

"Five points to Slytherin." Having reluctantly handed out points, Harry then moved on. "Once the curse has been cast, the victim has less than ten minutes before he succumbs to the curse. Of course, he'll be rendered unable to cast the countercurse himself and will have to hope someone else can do it for him."

Seamus put up his hand, although he already suspected he didn't want to know the answer to his question. "Will we be casting it today, Professor?"

"Yes," Harry said, watching a few faces pale, although Zabini looked quite pleased about the possibility. "I will, however, require a volunteer to start the lesson."

Zabini's smile vanished and Harry noticed a few more pale faces as he looked around the students assembled in front of him.

He was surprised when Seamus put his hand up again and nervously said, "I'll do it, Professor."

Harry beckoned to him. "Come and stand in front of this mat, Mr. Finnigan."

His legs shaking, Seamus headed to the front of the classroom, beads of sweat running visibly down his face.

Harry turned to the class. "The wand movement is like thus." He demonstrated several times. "And the incantation is, of course, Protractus Crucio Mortis." He then ordered the class into pairs, Seamus being the only one without a partner, his usual partner Terry Boot in the hospital wing after falling foul to a charms spell cast by Draco. "Please watch as I demonstrate."

Seamus hit the floor as the spell impacted him and he began screaming, but his pain was over in seconds as Harry swiftly cast the countercurse. Then after giving Seamus a pain potion, Harry helped him up and pointed to a rat that was in a cage on Harry's desk. "Since you have no partner and you volunteered, you'll be practicing on the rat and therefore exempt from having the curse cast on you again."

Draco was far from happy with this and he hissed at Zabini, "That's not fa..."

His voice trailed off as it became apparent that Harry had overheard him as Harry crooked his finger at Draco.

"On reflection I do believe you're right, Mr. Malfoy. It's not fair." Harry's voice held no warmth as Draco headed up to his desk. "So I think I should cast the spell on everyone, beginning with you."

Draco subsequently spent a painful two minutes writhing in agony on the floor before Harry finally cast the countercurse. When Harry eventually did, he leant over Draco and hissed, "In future, Mr. Malfoy, I suggest you keep your opinions to yourself otherwise I'll make you the guinea pig for every single pupil in this class during this lesson. Do I make myself clear?"

Between his sobs, Draco managed to acknowledge it was. Harry tossed him a painkilling potion. "I suggest you take this and join your partner."

The rest of the lesson was filled with screams and tears and Harry watched it all impassively, before he finally called an end to it. "For your homework you will discover five more similar spells, write two feet on their possible use, the wand movement required, the incantation and the countercurse if any. You have two weeks to complete your assignment and it will count as thirty percent of your marks towards your NEWT examination." Harry then turned to Seamus. "Thirty points to Gryffindor for offering to be today's volunteer. Class dismissed."

The class then watched as Harry stalked out.

When he returned to their rooms, Hermione knew that something was terribly amiss with Harry, but despite her best efforts, he shut her out totally. "Harry, please tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing," Harry said in a lackluster voice. "I need to see Sirius." Then, without a backward glance, he walked out of the room.

St. Bart's

Sirius was at work when the door opened and Harry walked in. "You look awful."

"I can't keep kidding myself, Sirius," Harry said without preamble, flopping into a seat. "I'm slipping. In fact I think I've slipped. I put Malfoy through hell today and I enjoyed every second of it."

"Tell me," Sirius said, putting down his work to give Harry his full attention.

And so Harry told him about the lesson, before he covered his face with his hands. "I'm changing, Sirius. I'm lying to my girlfriend, to Pansy and to Remus."

"Why didn't you go to him?" Sirius asked, surprised that Harry had come to him, given what Harry's problem was.

"Because you, more than he, will understand how it feels," Harry said. "He's already a Dark Creature and can ignore the pull. I can't, and I know you must have gone through the same thing."

"I did," Sirius confirmed.

Harry took a shuddering breath. "I don't know what to do, Sirius."

"Now that the school year is almost up, you need to give up on the practice if you can," Sirius said as he got up and moved around the desk.

"I've been too afraid to practice," Harry admitted. "And I'm afraid if I let myself go over the edge, then as we discussed before, I'll turn into someone I don't recognize. I think I already have, and I'm afraid I'll end up like Bellatrix and not you."

Sirius could see this was making Harry very scared. "Then we need to put you through withdrawal this summer. In the meantime hold in there."

Harry let Sirius pull him into a hug and he stayed that way for a long time, before pulling free. "I'd better get back."

By the end of the term, things had settled into an uncomfortable if now familiar routine. Tom continued to make inroads into the Muggle world, his attacks growing more and more deadly, and more often than not, occasionally spilling over into the wizarding world. Out of Harry and Sirius, Sirius was actually succeeding in getting closer to Tom, having played several more games of chess with Tom and having dined with him twice, but neither had made any insignificant progress.

Thankfully a few months earlier, the women in Belvedere House, as the house Anna was locked in was called, had finally been allowed egress to wander around the house, Tom believing they were now quite likely resigned to their fate, and Anna had at long last begun her endeavors to build up the Auror network once more.

However, it was beginning to grate on Harry's nerves that, in essence, over the space of the last year he had achieved nothing except for teaching Death Eater children to become better at becoming Death Eaters, and he was venting his frustration in a group meeting the day after he left Hogwarts for the summer holidays. "It's driving me insane that we're getting nowhere. We're doing nothing, nothing at all."

"There is something we could do," Sirius said. "We could go after the Hufflepuff Cup."

"But it's in the most secure place possible and there's no way we're going to get in there," Remus said. "And Draco Malfoy is hardly going to help us."

"Oh, but he is," Sirius said, having thought long and hard about things. "At least the real Draco Malfoy is."

Although everyone else looked confused, Remus understood where Sirius was going with his suggestion. "And do you really think his mother is going to simply let us tell her son the truth?"

Hermione interrupted. "What are you talking about?"

"Draco Malfoy isn't the heir to the Black fortune, a boy named Julian Viking is," Sirius said, rather enjoying the fact that Hermione was looking confused. "And not only that, he's also Lucius and Narcissa's firstborn son."

"You really have lost me," Hermione said in frustration.

"He's a squib!" Ron almost yelled, figuring out what Hermione had not. "And Malfoy gave him away."

"Almost correct," Sirius said, smiling at Hermione's annoyance that Ron had figured out what she had not. "Julian is a squib but Malfoy didn't give his firstborn away, he swapped him with his mistress' magical son."

Now Hermione caught on. "And Lestrangle left her vault and its contents to Draco Malfoy, which I'm guessing is what Julian's real name is."

"Correct," Sirius said.

Harry harked back to Remus' mention of Julian's mother. "So how are you going to convince Julian's mother to betray her lover?"

"By telling her all about Lucius and his treachery," Sirius announced in a triumphant voice. "And if she refuses to let him help, then I'll get Remus to arrest her."

"You can't arrest someone for sleeping with somebody," Harry said in exasperation.

"No, but we arrest her under suspicion of being a Death Eater and then ask her son for help," Sirius said, having thought this through.

"And if he refuses?"

"Then we tell him his mother is a Death Eater and offer him an exchange: her freedom for his help."

Luna thought this rather mean. "What about if he's nothing like the Draco Malfoy we know?"

"Then we can be reasonable," Sirius said, before asking Remus what he thought of the idea. "So, Remus, what do you think?"

"I think it's a good idea in theory," Remus said after a moment. "We have to get that Cup and check it out, but I don't think threatening the boy's mother is a good idea. However, I do think we should talk to both of them and explain the situation."

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Lucy looked suspiciously at Remus although his credentials checked out. "And you wish to speak to my son?"

"I do."

Lucy slowly opened her door wider. "Then you'd better come in." She led Remus up a narrow corridor and into a spacious dark paneled room with a large table and a smaller desk in it that was obviously her office. "You can wait here."

A few minutes later, Remus stood up as Julian was shown into the room. Lucy closed the door behind her. "I'm not leaving him alone."

"That's fine," Remus said, before addressing Julian. "Good morning, Julian. I'm Ignotus." Remus then showed his ID before holding out his hand, which Julian shook.

"Pleased to meet you, Sir. You're the head of the Unspeakables in the UK, aren't you?" Julian was taking Legal History at his current school and he knew the name of Ignotus quite well.

"That's correct."

"What do you want with me?" Julian asked.

"I need your help in a matter of British national security," Remus said, before indicating that Julian should sit down.

Lucy was rather confused. "But he's an American."

"I know," Remus acknowledged. "But I still need his help; it's to extract an object from a vault at Gringotts UK."

"Gringotts UK?" Julian asked in befuddlement. "But I don't have a vault there."

Remus slid over a piece of parchment. "This is a copy of the will of Bellatrix Lestrage, a former Death Eater..."

"Who killed the Headmistress of Hogwarts before being killed herself by the Potions Master," Julian said, making Remus aware that he knew exactly who Lestrage was. "What has she to do with me?" Here Julian looked more closely at the parchment. "She left everything to Draco Malfoy."

"You're Draco Malfoy," Remus said bluntly.

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake," Lucy said. "Draco is Julian's half-brother."

Remus decided to skate over that point for a moment and he focused on Lucius instead. "So you know who your father is?"

Julian nodded. "Yes, as do my sisters."

Remus returned his attention back to Lucy. "What do you know about Lucius?"

"He's an investor, he's married to Narcissa and we were in a relationship up until two years ago," Lucy said, summing things up.

"He's also a Death Eater," Remus revealed. "In fact he's part of Tom's Inner Circle – I take it you know who Tom is."

"Of course I do," Lucy said, but she was having trouble believing what she was hearing. "But you must have the wrong man. I know Lucius can be a little cut-throat in the business world but that doesn't make him a Death Eater."

"What if I could prove that he is a Death Eater and that Julian is Draco Malfoy?"

Julian answered before his mother could. "Then we'd have to weigh up the evidence that has been presented to us before we came to a conclusion, Sir."

Remus pointed to the dish on the conference table. "Do you know what this is?"

Julian shook his head. "No, Sir."

"It's a pensieve."

"A receptacle for storing and viewing memories," Julian stated, not realizing he sounded a little like Hermione. "They're on the syllabus for next year and so I haven't seen one until now and we haven't yet covered the theory behind their inner workings in class yet."

"Then I'll explain what I know about them as we go along."

Lucy looked at the pensieve with both interest and trepidation. "That must mean you have a memory in there to show us, don't you?"

"I have several actually," Remus said and he withdrew his wand, causing both Lucy and Julian some consternation. "I, Unspeakable Ignottus, swear on my life and my magic that all of the memories in the pensieve have been retrieved by me and that they are all authentic."

"What do we have to do?" Julian asked as Remus reholstered his wand.

"Take my hand – it won't hurt," Remus said.

"He can take mine," Lucy said, not wanting this man touching her son, and, as she spoke she grabbed Julian's hand, immersing them both, Remus slipping in to join them a moment later.

Julian looked around the grey misted interior with interest. "Are we actually inside here?"

"Our physical bodies are essentially frozen on the outside of the pensieve," Remus explained as he had said he would. "We are projected images, but we can touch each other. I've afraid I don't

under the physical laws of the actual workings of the pensieve to explain in any more detail than that."

"Will we able to touch people in the memories?"

"No," Remus said and he took out his wand. "This isn't really here but because it's part of my soul it works as if it was." He then brought the first memory on line. "I'm afraid this memory will be the most difficult for you to view. It's why I know that you were born Draco Malfoy."

"That's okay, Sir. I'd prefer to start out with the tough memory first," Julian said and he then prepared himself.

Remus began the memory, which was one he had taken from Sirius of Sirius and Narcissa's speech about swapping the children at birth.

Julian was stunned to see Sirius Black was in the memory but he remained stoically silent until it had finished.

Lucy was pale and shaking. "I don't believe it."

When Julian remained silent, not even acknowledging his mother, Remus spoke gently to him. "I'm sorry you had to hear it like that, but I'm not entirely sure you would have believed me without the full factual evidence."

"I wouldn't have," Julian finally agreed, his voice shaking. "But it's hard to discover that the man you thought was a decent father to your sisters is in fact someone who threatens innocent children and his wife." He glanced at his pale mother. "You really didn't know?"

Lucy slowly shook her head. "No." She went to reach out for Julian, almost afraid he'd reject her.

Julian slid into his mother's embrace, feeling her shudder. "I'm sorry, Mum."

"I should be the one apologizing," Lucy said, tears filling her eyes at Julian's concern. She then released him before facing Remus. "Very well, I believe you about Julian, and I suppose I should believe you about Lucius being a Death Eater as well, but I still need to see the evidence."

Remus could feel Julian's turmoil and he therefore gently asked, "Do you feel up to continuing, Julian?"

Julian nodded, wanting to see what else had been hidden from him. "Yes, Sir."

Remus thought this young man had a great deal more backbone than Lucius' other son although he kept that opinion to himself. He also said nothing about Julian's comment about Lucius being a decent father. "This is a memory of one of our spies viewing a Map."

"That's hardly convincing evidence," Lucy said angrily, although her anger was directed at the man who wasn't there.

"This is no ordinary Map – it shows who is in Hogwarts, which as you probably know is now Tom's stronghold," Remus said, starting the memory. "And the Map is from when a former colleague, who I believed to be a friend, was in a meeting of the Inner Circle - watch."

Lucy was far from convinced as she watched the memory of Harry looking at the Map with Remus. "Harry Potter? I thought he was dead."

"That's what everyone believes," Remus said, aware of what a big chance they were taking by revealing Harry's existence. "Harry wanted you to see this before you see a memory of him taking on Lucius in a show duel – it's actually Harry who is spying for us."

"I'm afraid I'm finding this all a little farfetched," Lucy remarked. "Sirius Black is supposed to be dead as is Harry Potter and you could be anybody masquerading behind that hood."

Remus dropped his hood. "Does this help?"

Julian gasped – Remus' picture had been plastered all over the wizarding world, both locally in the UK and abroad. "You're Remus Lupin!"

Remus smiled. "I am."

Lucy took a little more convincing. "Swear it's really you."

Remus did so before shedding his cloak entirely. "So, are you willing to help us now you know the truth?"

"I want more details," Lucy demanded, before adding a proviso. "And I want to speak to Julian alone."

Remus was subsequently shown to a room to freshen up and once they were finally alone, Julian had to face the truth about his brother and that Lucy was not his birth mother and he nervously posed a question for Lucy. "Mum, do you want my half-brother back?"

"I don't know," Lucy answered honestly. "I have no idea what's he like."

"Do you think Mr. Lupin knows?"

"He seems to know everything else," Lucy said in an exasperated voice.

"It's not his fault."

"You like him, don't you?"

Julian did. "I do and I trust him, even though I hardly know him."

"Then we'll trust your instincts." Lucy could see that her words had cheered her son up immensely and she cupped his face, looking up into it, Julian long having grown taller than her. "Julian, no matter what I decide about Draco, you're my son and you always will be. I love you."

"I love you too, Mum," Julian said, his voice wavering before he burst into tears.

Lucy comforted the child she had believed to be her firstborn and she felt an unrelenting anger aimed at Lucius and his machinations. She had, however, spoken the truth about Julian – he was her son as far as she was concerned but she was still intended to have things out with Lucius as soon as she could.

When Julian's crying jag was over, he wiped his eyes. "Sorry, but I was afraid you wouldn't want me."

"Never, ever, think that." Lucy squeezed Julian's hand. "Go wash up, take a calming potion and then come back here. I'll go fetch our houseguest and continue our conversation."

When Remus was brought back in the first topic of conversation was Draco. "What exactly do you want to know?"

Julian shared a glance with his mother before asking, "What is he like? I've never met him."

"Do you want me to be polite or honest?"

"Honest," Lucy said firmly.

"Then I'll tell you that you got the better end of the deal with Julian," Remus said drily and finally passed on his opinion. "Draco is rotten to the core."

Lucy was far from thrilled to hear this. "Is that your opinion or is it a statement based on the truth?"

"The truth."

"Do you have a memory to back up your statement?"

"I do – one of Harry's, but I can assure you that it's far from comfortable viewing."

"I'd like to see it nevertheless," Lucy said, well aware that one had to have as many facts as possible to be able to draw a decent conclusion.

"Very well." Remus began the memory of Harry's first time in Hogwarts after Tom had taken it over, stopping it at the point where Draco began his rape of the Chinese Auror. "I don't believe you need to see any further that."

"I don't," Lucy said, swallowing hard to hold back her nausea. "I actually feel sick despite having taken a calming potion."

Remus therefore decided to pull all three of them out of the pensieve. "Sit down for a moment and then we can talk again."

Julian headed towards where the water carafe was situated. "Can I get you a glass of water, Mum, Sir?"

"I'll get them," Remus said, pulling out a chair for a pale Lucy. "You should sit down with your mother."

Julian did as Remus requested, gratefully taking the glass of water when Remus brought it over. "Thank you."

Remus sat down next to Julian. "I have to be honest. I expected you to be just like your half brother, but you're nothing like him."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Julian said, taking a mouthful of the soothing water. "But I want to know if you'd have ever told me who I really was if you didn't need my help."

"I would, or at least Sirius Black would have." Remus then waited for the questions he knew must be brewing in the pair's minds.

"But why would Sirius Black have told me..." Julian hesitated before answering his own question. "Because I'm the heir to the Black Family wealth and not Draco."

Remus was rather impressed by the young man's deduction. "You are and I'm surprised you didn't realize this before now."

"I don't see how," Julian said, confused by Remus' comment.

"You should have an heir ring," Remus said.

"The ring!" both Julian and Lucy exclaimed, before Julian went into more detail. "When I was really little, I discovered a ring on my finger – of course I took it off and went and asked Mum about it. She didn't know where I'd gotten it from and thought I'd found it and forgotten about it. However, we were both amazed when Mum said she couldn't see it on my finger. She guessed it had to be an heir ring of some sort but she suspected it was from an offshoot of our family we didn't know about and because I'm a squib and can't do magic, I was unable to test out this theory."

"Do you know where the ring is now?"

"On my finger," Julian said, before sliding it off and holding up a small gold band that only became visible once it left Julian's finger. "See."

"I can't test it either," Remus said. "You'd better slide it back on. Sirius will be able to test it out if you agree to meet with him."

"So he's not a Death Eater?" Lucy asked, somewhat dubious about her son having contact with Sirius. "He didn't exactly seem like the nicest person in the memory you showed us."

"I know he appeared ruthless but what Sirius said was purely said in the heat of the moment and out of concern for me, and he only did it to get Narcissa to acquiesce to our plans – she'd never have gone along with them otherwise."

"She doesn't seem to have much luck with how men treat her, does she?" Lucy commented wryly.

"It was her decision to marry Lucius," Remus said, keeping his face neutral. "And she had another option open to her but she chose him."

"You," Lucy observed. "I noticed that you were the bait Black used first."

"And his ploy failed, just as I failed..." Remus trailed off. "Sorry – she's old history as far as I'm concerned and I'd prefer to keep her that way."

Lucy respected Remus' privacy and so she changed the subject slightly. "I'm guessing that the memory you showed us of Black was fairly recent." When Remus nodded to confirm it was, Lucy went on. "So how did he survive his execution?"

"I helped to procure his rescue, illegally of course," Remus admitted. "But only after letting him die first."

"You've confused me," Lucy said.

"Then I'd better explain."

Remus' answer to Lucy's comment took some time and by the time he had finished, Lucy had recovered herself and discovered she was hungry. "I think we should have dinner, Remus, if I might call you that. Would you like to stay over and join us?"

Remus nodded. "I would."

"You can also tell us a little more about what you want from Julian and why," Lucy said.

A short and information filled time later, Lucy found herself trying to get her whirling thoughts in order. "Hold on a moment, let me get this straight: Julian was replaced with Draco by Lucius because Draco was born a squib; my birth son is now living a life as a Draco Malfoy and he's not exactly perfect son material; Sirius Black, a convicted and supposedly dead murderer, is still alive because you and Harry Potter rescued him; and you want my son's help to extract a Horcrux, a potentially dangerous item, from a vault in Gringotts that belonged to a crazy woman?"

"Yes."

"Why are these Horcruxes so important?"

Remus then told them more about the Horcruxes and how Harry had survived the attempt on his life. "That's why we need your help, if you're willing to give it."

"I'm not saying that I don't want to help but I don't see how destroying the Cup can help in the fight against Tom," Julian said after weighing up the situation. "You've been unable to track down Voldemort..."

Remus interrupted. "As yet yes, but we'd like to be at a point where if we ever do, we'll be able to move against him."

"How risky is it?"

"Since nobody is expecting this, it's a moderate risk," Remus said truthfully. "And the quicker we act, the less likely anybody will discover the truth."

"What guarantees of my son's safety do you have if he helps you?"

"I can't guarantee it but as I've told Julian, no-one will be expecting this."

"If you do this and Lucius is what you say he is, then I'm concerned for not only Julian, but also for my daughters' welfare."

Remus now finally brought up the subject that Julian had touched on earlier in the day. "I took it from Julian's comment that Lucius cares for his daughters."

Lucy's face tightened momentarily before relaxing again. "Yes, more so than Julian and I always believed it was because Julian was a squib. Now, of course, I know differently. It's probably because he feels ashamed..."

"I don't think Lucius is ashamed at all," Julian broke in. "I think he's embarrassed by me – because I'm a symbol that he failed."

"Or his wife did," Lucy added, before apologizing to Remus. "Sorry."

"As I said, she's old history." Remus then refocused the subject on Lucy's daughters. "Where are your daughters at the moment?"

"Staying with friends for a few days – they're due home tomorrow and supposed to be bringing their friends with them and then Lucius was supposed to be coming over to see them." Lucy sighed, aware that her world was likely about to be turned upside down.

She was right as Julian said, "We'd better start to make arrangements no matter what you decide about Lucius, Mum. I'm going to help get that Horcrux."

"This isn't something we can decide overnight..."

"Actually it is, Mum," Julian interrupted. "It's the right thing to do."

Remus expected Lucy to continue to argue with her son, but instead she surprised him by smiling at Julian and saying, "If you want to do this, then you have my support."

"I do want to do it," Julian turned to Remus. "When do we leave?"

Lucy spoke up before Remus could answer her son. "As soon as we can, I don't want the girls exposed to Lucius and so we'll be accompanying Julian if he's going to help you. However, I'll need you to recommend somewhere to stay in England."

"I can do better than that. I can offer you a place to stay that is warded and extremely safe and isn't known to anyone in Tom's organization."

This sounded better as far as Lucy was concerned. "Where?"

"In the short term, my home – I have a room at Harry's I can stay at so that you'd have plenty of space at River Dene."

The Next Day

After a rather stomach churning portkey trip, the group arrived at Remus' home where Sophia, Lucy's fourteen year old daughter, looked suspiciously at Remus, who had kept his identity hidden during the time while Lucy collected the girls directly from their friends' homes. Therefore the moment they arrived, she said, "Mum said you'd tell us who you are when we get here."

After giving instructions to Macclesby, Remus dropped the hood from his cloak. "I'm..."

"Remus Lupin," Sophia blurted out, recognizing Remus from a poster he had seen. "You're on the capture or kill list everywhere!"

Lucy looked at her daughter in astonishment. "How do you know that?"

"Cathy Gunter's dad runs the Crier and she gets the paper all the time," Sophia said, before pointing at Remus. "And he's been in it a lot."

As Emily, who was only five, shrank back against her mother, Lucy berated Sophia. "I've told you about reading rubbish like that."

"It's news, Mummy."

Emily butted in with a question. "Mummy, is he going to hurt us?"

"No, he's not," Lucy said, wrapping her arms around her daughter's shoulders. "Mr. Lupin is actually one of the good guys." She then turned to Sophia. "We'll talk about this later. For now please take your sister and follow Macclesby."

Julian held out his hand. "I'll go with them."

Lucy gave Remus an apologetic glance. "I'm sorry about Sophia – she's rather a handful, and I hate to think how she's going to react when she learns about Lucius and that I'm not going to allow her to see him again."

"At least she and her sister have you and your son," Remus said, removing his cloak and dropping it over the back of the sofa.

"And you should know that I do consider Julian my son and most definitely not Draco, although I blame Lucius and Narcissa somewhat for how he turned out." Lucy sat down. "And right now I want to know more about Lucius and his affiliation with Tom. Yesterday I wasn't quite ready to deal with anymore than you'd already dumped on my lap, even if Julian was."

"I was surprised by that," Remus said, Julian having wanted to talk more about Lucius and Tom and having been vetoed by Lucy as it had been almost two a.m. before the three of them had retired to bed. "Most young men would have reacted very differently."

"Julian isn't like everyone else," Lucy said, her voice a little bitter. "He's already had to face the world and its prejudices, so he tends to look at the situation first before acting."

"Which makes him a very astute young man."

"Everyone assumes that because he's a squib he's stupid, when nothing could be further from the truth." Lucy, however, didn't include Remus in this assessment.

"I gathered he was intelligent when I noticed a picture of him in a Harvard tie." Remus had spotted the picture on Lucy's desk when he had first been led into her office. "Although isn't he rather young to already be attending?"

Lucy smiled. "Since a mainstream magical school refused to take him, I hired a tutor for him so that he could learn Arithmancy, Magical History, Astronomy and theory in everything else. I didn't want my son to grow up on the fringes of our society, although in America we are a little more liberal than you are in the UK. Julian finished his studies two years earlier than his peers and that's why he's currently studying law at Harvard, and I'm glad he is. It means that he'll be able to make a living as any other wizard would."

"He doesn't actually have to work if he doesn't want to," Remus said before bringing up Sirius again. "The Black fortune is rather extensive."

"I'd ask if Black worked but that would be a stupid question."

Remus disabused Lucy of her notion. "Sirius is a healer, albeit under a false identity."

"And when will we get to meet him?"

"That's up to Julian," Remus said. "I've sent a note to Sirius, but he's going to keep his distance until Julian is ready."

Julian walked back into the room, catching the final few words. "When I'm ready for what?"

"To meet Sirius Black," Lucy said, standing up to look at her son.

"I'm ready whenever he is."

"Mummy!" A girl's horrified scream rent the air and Remus and Lucy went running down the corridor.

Sophia was standing looking at Emily who had a cut on her forehead from which blood was pouring. "I didn't mean to hurt her."

"We'll talk about it later," Lucy snapped, gathering her weeping and bloody daughter into her arms.

"It looks as though you're going to meet Sirius sooner than you thought," Remus said, and he vanished.

Sirius paid little attention to Julian or the others when he arrived, his attention on the upset and injured girl. "Hey there, my name's Sirius."

"He's a murderer!" Sophia gasped, in a voice similar to the one that she had used when Remus had revealed his identity.

Julian grabbed his sister by the shoulder and manhandled her out of the room. "No, he's not."

Emily shrank back against her mother.

Sirius wished Sophia had kept her mouth shut, but he was used to difficult children. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just need to take a look at the cut on your head."

"No!"

Sirius produced a small fluffy bear from his pocket, which began singing, immediately capturing Emily's attention, before it suddenly stopped. "This is Barnaby. He'll sing more if you tell him your name."

Emily was stubbornly silent for a few minutes before she finally whispered, "Emily."

As Sirius had promised, Barnaby began singing a lullaby inserting Emily's name where appropriate and, satisfied that his latest customer was busy looking at the bear, Sirius flicked out his wand and began to check Emily over before handing Lucy a salve. "I've healed the cut but to stop any bruising, you'll need to use this for the next day or so."

As if on cue, Barnaby stopped singing and Sirius picked him up, holding him out to Emily. "He only sings once or twice a day but if you want to keep him, he's yours."

Emily was half afraid of Sirius, but given that her mother was smiling encouragingly, she reached out and grabbed the bear, surprising everyone when she thanked Sirius. "Thank you."

Remus could feel Lucy's pride in her daughter as he straightened up and Lucy picked Emily up. "Macclesby will show you to her room and you can put her down for a nap."

"Not tired," Emily said mutinously.

"You'll be asleep before you know it," Lucy said, following Macclesby out.

When she returned to the living room, she discovered a new arrival.

Harry stood up and held out his hand. "Hello, I'm Harry Potter."

Lucy shook his hand. "Lucy Viking."

"And I'm Sirius Black," Sirius said with a smile, although he didn't bother offering his hand. "We didn't really have time for introductions earlier."

Lucy sat down. "This is quite illustrious company: two dead men and a fugitive."

Remus could feel her amusement but it was Harry who answered her. "And if you agree to help us and Tom finds out, then I'm afraid that you'll all become fugitives too."

"Better a fugitive than a Death Eater," Lucy snapped almost reflexively, her amusement fading as she was still smarting somewhat from the news about Lucius.

"Well said, but you do realize that that is exactly what Sirius and I both are, don't you?"

Lucy nodded as did Julian, who then said, "Mr. Black..."

"I think you should call me Sirius," Sirius remarked. "And I have no doubt you have lots of questions about your heritage."

"I don't actually," Julian said. "I don't want it."

Sirius was a little stunned. "Why not?"

"Because one day you'll have a son of your own and it seems pointless to learn the ins and outs of what would be required of me when it should fall to your son."

Sirius became grave. "I'm afraid I'll never have a son, Julian. I carry a genetic defect that is prevalent in the Black Family that causes a problem known as Filius Superstes, which means that if I was to get someone pregnant with a son, then she would die because the baby would kill her, although it's likely the child would survive. I refused that option years ago when my parents tried to force me to marry someone to beget an heir and I'm certainly not ever going to do it now."

"I'm very sorry, Sir," Julian said in just as a grave a voice. "But you should know that I'm a squib and there's no guarantee I'd ever have a magical child or that I don't have this disease."

"Then perhaps we should run a test," Lucy suggested, wanting to find out if this disease was likely to affect Julian.

Julian nodded, suddenly feeling just as anxious as Lucy to find out the truth. "I agree."

All of them except for Remus, who agreed to stay behind and keep an eye on the girls in case they woke up, left for Potter Place, apparating directly into the basement. Once they arrived downstairs, Julian watched patiently as Sirius summoned a small amount of blood from him before putting a few ingredients into a cauldron, adding distilled water and finally the blood. "How will you know?"

"The potion will turn black if it's positive," Sirius said.

All four watched in silence as the potion began to hiss and bubble before suddenly it became calm and went completely black. Julian drooped visibly. "I have it as well."

"I'm sorry," Sirius said, well aware of how awful it felt to get news like that. "But it's better you know now."

"And it's why you need to track down who might become heir now that it's impossible for me to do so," Julian said, slipping off the heir ring and handing it to Sirius. "And I'd like to head back to Remus' home."

Sirius let Harry take Lucy and he took Julian, both Julian and Lucy leaving him and Harry alone once they arrived back. "I hate giving bad news."

"Do you know who your next heir would be?"

Sirius shook his head. "I'd have to take a look at the tapestry in the house from hell."

"You're going to have to go in there sometime."

"But not right now," Sirius said, helping himself to a scotch. "Do you have any ideas about Gringotts?"

"I think Remus' initial idea is the best one," Harry said, having talked it over with Hermione. "Julian declares who he is, offers up blood to prove it, and then acquires the Cup and walks back out. Of course we'll be providing covert back-up in case something does go wrong, but given that he is the real Draco Malfoy, Julian shouldn't have any problems."

"Let's hope not."

Two Days Later

Julian sat staring at the Cup he had managed to retrieve without any difficulty, just as Harry had hoped. "That's it? It doesn't look like much."

"Yes," Harry said, having accompanied Julian under cover his cloak so that not even goblin magic could detect him. "To me it's almost as though it's calling to me."

"That's creepy," Sophia said, before fluttering her eyes at Justin. "Don't you think so?"

Justin was well aware that the young girl had a crush on him and he did his best to ignore it, although a lack of girlfriend, Padma having dumped him, wasn't helping. "Yes, I suppose it is."

Lucy hid her smile at how uncomfortable Justin looked. "How will you destroy it?"

"We don't know yet," Sirius admitted. "And we also have a locket we need to destroy."

"And how long do you think we'll have to stay here?"

"If nothing happens, then hopefully just a few weeks," Remus said, their plan having gone very smoothly.

Unfortunately something was about to happen.

Next Chapter: The Cup is discovered to be missing; Tom hits back with devastating results.

Chapter 64: The Response

Draco Malfoy opened up the statement he had requested from Gringotts, expecting it to give him an update on how much interest he had made in the last month. He quickly sat up in horror as he noted that it not only showed a decrease in interest but it also noted that something had been taken from one of his vaults, a vault that had once belonged to Bellatrix Lestrange.

Tom flicked his wand at the door when the knock came and it flew open. "Come in, shut the door and take off your mask. We need to talk."

Altus entered the room, shedding his mask as he had been ordered to do so. "My Lord?"

"You're not in trouble," Tom said in a short voice before pointing at a chair. "Sit down, Dae. I want to talk to you about Lupin."

Dae Venant, Remus' former partner, did as Tom asked. "What do you want to know about him?"

"I know you were once friends," Tom said, being unaware that Remus had been an Unspeakable, Dae's oath preventing him from saying anything or even hinting at the possibility.

"We were," Dae confirmed.

"I need to know everything you can tell me about him," Tom said.

Dae thought quickly, paraphrasing what he knew. "He attended Oxford, both Magical and Muggle; we shared a house together for years..."

Tom interrupted. "Did he know you were a Death Eater?"

"No." Dae knew he would never have been allowed to become an Unspeakable if Remus had done so. "And he also probably doesn't know that I betrayed him and everybody else."

"I suspect that he probably does," Tom surmised. "You'd be surprised at how these things get out – I'm not so stupid as to believe that there isn't a spy or two in my ranks."

This did surprise Dae. "You suspect someone?"

"No, if I did, they'd be dead by now," Tom intoned in a very dry voice. "But I'd be a fool to think that my organization is watertight."

"So you don't want me to approach Remus if I can find him?"

"Do you think you can find him?"

"There are rumors floating around that there have been sightings of British Unspeakables all over the globe, so perhaps."

"Could you guarantee that?"

Dae shook his head. "To be honest, no I couldn't."

"Then in answer to your earlier question, I don't want you to approach Lupin. I want to find a way to hit out at him." Tom then revealed to Dae what he had discovered. "Somebody has taken the last Horcrux Voldemort made and I believe it to be Lupin."

"I thought it was unattainable," Dae said in astonishment.

"So did I but it appears that Lucius has been harboring a dirty little secret – his firstborn was a squib and so he exchanged him for his mistress' child, a child who would have no problem accessing a vault left for Draco Malfoy."

Dae couldn't hold back his whistle. "So Draco isn't exactly who he seems to be."

"So it would seem," Tom said. "Anyway, when Lucius went in search of his former mistress and his children, they've gone missing. A friend of the eldest daughter told Lucius that a cloaked and hooded man was accompanying the mistress. And although you can't confirm it, I suspect it was your former partner, Amicus, hiding behind the hood and that Lupin must be in contact with him, although I know it's something you can't confirm."

"I can't," Dae agreed, frustrated that he was unable to tell Tom that Remus was Amicus – he, of course, had no idea that the name of Amicus had now been passed on to Justin. "I can, however, tell you

that if you're looking to get back at Remus, you might want to start by attacking his friends."

"I thought they were either dead or hiding out with him."

"Not all of them."

"Name them!"

Dae could see that Tom's patience was less than stellar and so he started at the top of his list, giving the name of one of Remus' closest friends, apart from himself. "He was very good friends with Arthur Weasley and his family and, as far as I know, the Weasleys are still alive in Azkaban, aren't they?"

"I have no idea," Tom said, "but we can find out. Who else?"

"He was good friends with Julianne Solace, the Auror you executed a while back," Dae said, trying to think of whom Remus had known.

"That's hardly of use to me," Tom snapped. "What about the other Weasleys?"

"Charlie Weasley lives in a dragon reserve in Romania, but no-one has checked recently to see if this is still the case, not after last time."

"If we send men in there, remind me to send someone with a brain this time," Tom said, recalling how disastrous his attempt to attack the Reserve had been. "Anybody else? The Weasleys are a good idea but Lupin isn't exactly going to find out about them anytime soon and I want to hit him hard."

Dae put him right. "Actually he will find out. The Weasleys have a clock that indicates the condition of each family member. When we burnt down their pigsty of a house it was missing. I think Ron, the youngest boy, must have taken it after he escaped from Hogwarts."

"Good, then Lupin will know what I've done and that it's his fault," Tom said and he was about to give orders when Dae interrupted him.

"I've thought of someone else. Remus' maternal grandparents are still alive, although they're Muggles and rather elderly. They live in a

village named Walsingham in Norfolk, and even though he's estranged from his mother, Remus used to visit his grandparents at least once or twice a year but even when he didn't visit, he was always sending care packages to them. I think it would hurt him dearly if you were attack the village and kill them."

Tom was more than pleased with this information. "That will be enough to be going on with, so I think a three-pronged attack: we attack the village, then the next day I'll execute the Weasleys, although I won't be announcing it this time – I don't want Lupin to have any warning, and at the same time I'll attack the dragon Reserve."

"Do you want me to lead the attack on the village?"

"I do," Tom confirmed, before smiling at Dae. "I originally doubted whether bringing you into the fold, so to speak, would be advantageous, but you've proved yourself many times over, more so than anybody else. You can tell Severus that he'll be leading the attack on the dragon Reserve and Draco Malfoy can go with him. Who knows I might get lucky and the brat will become a dragon snack."

"One can only hope," Dae said, not liking Draco any more than Tom did. "When are these attacks to be scheduled for?"

"Two days from now," Tom said, deciding to hit back sooner rather than later.

"Then I'll arrange it," Dae said and picking up his mask, he inclined his head briefly before slipping the mask on and taking his leave.

Two Days Later

It was almost noon when Sirius headed downstairs to discover he was almost alone. He could hear Emsie and what sounded like Luna in the conservatory and the barking of a dog told him what they were doing. Wanting to continue to enjoy his peace and quiet, he set off in the opposite direction for the breakfast room and, after summoning Macclesby, he was treated to a peaceful brunch. However, he had only just finished his last mouthful when his medical ring began to vibrate.

"Fuck it! Bang goes my day off."

In a move that had infuriated and worried Remus, a week ago, Tom had demanded that Sirius hand in his resignation in at St. Bart's and join his team full-time. However, Sirius still had to serve a month's notice and he had refused to capitulate to Tom's demands that he not bother, which had surprisingly earned Sirius Tom's begrudging respect. However, it had also earned Sirius a brief bout under the Cruciatus Curse.

With his ring vibrating urgently yet again, getting to his feet, Sirius grabbed his mug of coffee, hurried to his room and changed before vanishing. On his appearance at the hospital, he hurried into the emergency room, only to discover that no arrivals had made it there yet. "What do we have?"

Charity Levi, one of his fellow healers, filled him in. "From the reports we're getting in, a Muggle commuter jet crashed about four miles from here, straight into the middle of a wizarding village. It looks as though Tom has stepped up his game." She had no idea that Tom was not responsible for the accident, the plane coming down because of mechanical failure.

"So it's going to be a long one," Sirius said, taking another large mouthful of his coffee as he was well aware it would be some time before he got another one.

"Oh yes."

Charity was right, and not long after Sirius' comment, the emergency apparition teams began to arrive with the injured.

Sirius worked steadily throughout the day, glad that Tom had not summoned him. Then, as the afternoon and the casualties began to wane, Sirius was surprised to see a dirt covered Neville heading his way. "What's happened?"

"I need you to come with me," Neville said before bursting into tears.

Sirius turned to his fellow healer. "I have to go. Can you cover for me?"

Charity luckily failed to recognize Neville but she did recognize an emergency when she saw one. "Go ahead."

Sirius led Neville into his office before shoving at him the wizarding world's universal answer to getting sense out of someone. "Drink this."

Neville knocked back the calming potion before blurting out, "Harry was hurt but he's alive. But the others..."

Sirius now began to worry about everyone else and as Neville faltered Sirius barked out, "What about the others?"

"In Muggle hospitals or missing," Neville said, wringing his hands. "It just came out of nowhere... out of nowhere."

Sirius put two and two together and came up with five. "You were in the wizarding village when the plane crashed?"

"What plane?"

"A Muggle plane crashed into River Valley Heights..." Sirius trailed off as he saw a blank look on Neville's face. He therefore asked. "So if you're not talking about that, what are you talking about?"

"Tom attacked us."

"Where?"

"Little Walsingham," Neville said. "I thought you knew we were going with Remus."

It was then that Sirius connected the dots. "He went to visit his grandparents, didn't he?"

"Yes, but it was a last minute thing," Neville said, before dropping his head into hands. "So how did Tom know we'd be there?"

"I don't know," Sirius said, placing a hand on Neville's shoulder. "Tell me what happened."

"Remus told us where he was going and he said if we wanted to get out of the house for a while it would be okay to go with him. He said

that there was an Abbey and a Museum just around the corner from where his grandparents lived and so some of us decided to go along and spend some time there."

"Who went?"

"Everyone except for Luna, who stayed at home with Emsie as Emsie wanted to play with the new puppy Luna has."

Sirius was far from interested in Luna's puppy and he got down to the nitty gritty, deciding to ask the toughest question first. "Has anyone been killed?"

Neville nodded. "Parvati, I think, or it could have been Padma, I don't know."

"Shit!" Sirius couldn't help the expletive that fell from his lips. "And how badly injured are the others?"

"I don't know about everyone else but Harry was unconscious and I think Hermione might have splinched them because she was screaming and her foot looked all funny and so did Harry's finger..."

"Where are they?" Sirius asked impatiently.

"Wells Hospital," Neville said. "But I don't know where everyone else is."

"We'll start with Harry and Hermione," Sirius said, grabbing his medical bag. "Let's go. We'll check out Little Walsingham first."

Neville found himself back on the outskirts of the destroyed abbey. "There's nothing left."

"I can see that," Sirius told him as he began to walk through the rubble that remained after the attack. When he had found nobody left behind, he made the decision to move on. "We can apparate to the hospital from here."

When Sirius arrived, it was obvious that the small community hospital was far from fit for dealing with the sort of emergency that Tom's attack had created. He headed up to the desk. "My godson and his girlfriend have been admitted."

"I'm afraid you'll have to take a seat and someone will be with you shortly to take details."

Sirius turned back to Neville. "I'm going to do this the underhanded way. Stay here and I'll be back as soon as I can." He then headed out of the hospital before vanishing and then returning. Once inside he discovered that, as Neville had said, Harry and Hermione were both in the hospital and, with their injuries being so minor, he decided that the best place for them was back at Potter Place. Grabbing Harry's hand, he disappeared, before returning to collect Hermione, after which he continued his search of the tiny hospital but came up empty. He therefore dropped the invisibility spell and headed back to the front desk.

"Imperio."

The nurse's face glazed over.

"Where have they taken any other injured?"

"To Dereham Hospital in Dereham and Colman Hospital in Norwich."

"Finite." Sirius then grabbed Neville's hand and headed out of the hospital before disappearing and reappearing in Harry's bedroom. After checking Harry's hand and Hermione's foot, he agreed with Neville's prognosis. "One of them obviously tried to disapparate with the other and in the panic, they splinched themselves. This is easy for me to deal with but I want you to stay with them. I need to find the others."

On arriving at the first hospital the nurse had mentioned, the next person Sirius found was Justin, who was kicking up a stink and screaming Sirius' name out loud, making finding him very easy. Sirius immediately transfigured his clothing and headed into the cubicle, saying to the nurse, "I'll deal with him. I'm the relief doctor, Dr. Granger."

Justin had spotted Sirius as soon as he walked in and he had begun to talk even as Sirius was talking to the nurse. "Sirius, I can't feel my legs. I can't feel my legs."

"Sh," Sirius said, as he moved to Justin's side. "Take a deep breath for me, Justin, and try to relax. Tell me what happened."

Justin couldn't stop crying as he looked up at a friendly but concerned face. "I couldn't see Padma and everyone... everyone was screaming. I tried to defend myself but there were just too many of them. Sirius, I thought I was going to die."

"It's okay, Justin," Sirius said, aware that Justin wasn't thinking clearly if he was calling him by his real name. "You're going to be okay."

"My head hurts," Justin whimpered, never ever having been so frightened or in so much pain before. "Make it stop."

Sirius whispered quietly to the nurse, who added a drug to the IV that was already running, and Justin quickly closed his eyes. It was then that Sirius noted the restraints that were strapped around Justin's head and neck. "What did the medics say?"

"They think he's got a broken back – Dr. Domain has already scheduled x-ray and they should be here to take him down shortly." The nurse noted that Justin had seemed to recognize Sirius. "Do you know the boy?"

Sirius nodded. "His full name is Justin Edmund Finch-Fletchley and he's nineteen years old."

"Poor kid," the nurse said, as she looked down at the young man who was covered in cuts, blood and bruises, before noting down Justin's name and the information Sirius had just passed on. "I just hope that his injuries aren't as bad as they seem."

"So do I," Sirius said, although he knew that magic could cure a broken back although Justin would have a rather unpleasant time while it did. "I'll leave him in your capable hands."

Sirius' ongoing search then took him to the surgical wards where he could see from the indicator boards that there were two John Does in surgery as well as Remus, who usually had Muggle I.D. on him, unlike Ron or any of the others. Sirius decided to set up a magical ward to alert him of trouble just in case any Death Eaters were

following in his footsteps – he didn't want Remus dying on the table at the hands of a Death Eater.

After finding no-one else in the hospital, and, recalling Neville's comment about Parvati being dead, Sirius' next port of call was the morgue. After using the Imperius Curse yet again, he discovered that it was Padma who was dead, her necklace giving her away. Unfortunately he also recognized Remus' grandparents, or at least thought he did. Heading out, he set off for the third and final hospital.

Lucy was lying on a bed, a drip hooked up to her arm and she appeared to be sleeping. Sirius gently shook her. "Lucy?"

She groggily opened her eyes. "Julian? Sophia?"

"Julian's got a broken arm and leg," Sirius said softly. "I've taken him back to Potter Place and sedated him. He'll be fine by the morning. Sophia has head trauma but she'll be fine as well. I've left her here at the moment as I can't take care of so many people."

Lucy tried to move. "Got to get up."

"You've fractured your pelvis," Sirius told her. "I'm going to leave you here for the moment as well as I need to get back to see how Remus is doing – he's in surgery."

Lucy asked the same question Neville had. "How did they know we'd be there?"

"I don't know," Sirius had to say and he patted her hand. "I'm afraid I still have missing patients and so I need to go."

Lucy was still rather out of things and she simply closed her eyes and drifted back off to sleep.

When Sirius arrived back home, Harry was most definitely not sleeping and after checking out his hand and finding that it was healing well, he asked, "How are you holding up?"

"I'm angry, Sirius," Harry said in a soft but deadly voice. "And one day he will pay for this. Is there any news on the others? Neville has already told me about Parvati."

"It was actually Padma," Sirius corrected. "However, Ron is doing well after his surgery but Remus is in pretty bad shape as is Ernie. I overheard a nurse saying that they didn't expect him or Remus to survive."

Harry stared incredulously at Sirius, who didn't look the slightest bit affected by what he was saying. "Why aren't you there? They need you."

"There's little I can do for them at the moment," Sirius said, running a tired hand over his face. "And don't think this isn't killing me, because it is."

"And the others?" Harry asked, struggling against the tears that were now running down his cheeks.

Sirius simply gave it to him straight. "Parvati is still missing and Justin is in pretty bad shape. Everybody else should be home in a day or so."

A soft voice interrupted them. "Harry?"

Harry took Hermione's hand. "I'm here, Hermione."

"I thought I'd never see you again," Hermione said in a quavering voice. "I think I splinched myself."

As Harry confirmed she had, Sirius excused himself to go to see if he could find out anymore about the others, and Neville, who had stayed with Harry, moved to Hermione's other side.

"What happened?" Harry asked gently, wiping away his tears. "The last thing I remember before waking up here was deciding to follow you."

"Everyone else was walking around the park but I needed the bathroom and so I left. I'd just come out when I heard a rumble and the next thing I knew it was all dark. I felt dizzy and spotted you on the floor. I crawled over and tried to disapparate but I didn't get far, just inside the toilets. My foot was hurting and I began screaming and then I must have passed out."

"Apparently you were hysterical and they sedated you," Neville explained. "Don't you remember?"

"No," Hermione said softly before turning fear laden eyes on her boyfriend. "Are the others okay?"

"You have to be brave, Hermione," Harry said, keeping his voice as soft as possible but he knew that no gentleness was going to make the news any easier to hear. "Justin is pretty badly injured but is going to survive and Remus has just come out of surgery but it's not looking good. Ernie isn't good and Padma didn't make it but the others will be okay. Unfortunately there's no sign of Parvati."

Hermione started to weep and Harry sat down next to her, holding her against him. He looked sternly at Neville, who like Harry, had tears in his eyes. "We've sat around for too long, Nev. It's time we took the fight to him."

"How are you going to do that?" Neville asked.

"First of all I'm going to release the women from Belvedere House," Harry said in a determined voice. "I've left them there for far too long."

"And if you manage to get them out, where are you going to put them?" Neville asked, thinking that Harry should wait just a while longer as some of the women had been able find out useful information, which had included Tom's absence allowing Harry's recent trip into Laurifer House for a surveillance mission, although he found out nothing.

"Sirius' house at Grimmauld Place."

"Didn't he swear he'd never set foot in that hellhole again?" Neville asked, recalling Sirius' comment about the home he'd grown up in.

"Tough," Harry said in a voice that brooked no argument. "It's just a bloody house, Nev, and if it isn't big enough, then I open up my estate to whoever needs shelter."

Neville sighed. "I would have offered my home but given that it's gone..."

"Sorry, Nev. I think Sirius and I am going to have to go to Gringotts. I need to sign for the Potter Estate."

Suddenly Macclesby appeared. "Mr. Sirius needs you at the Colman hospital in room 423."

Neville stood up. "Stay here. I'll be back as soon as I know more."

"Thanks," Harry said, and he then turned all of his attention on the still weeping Hermione.

Neville discovered that room 423 was Ernie's. "How is he?"

Sirius shook his head. "Not good. He's bleeding internally and they can't stop it. And I'm really sorry but despite my best efforts neither can I."

Neville looked down in horror. "He's going to die?"

"I'm afraid so," Sirius said sadly, sitting by the boy's bed. "I told the nurse I was his personal doctor so that I could stay with him. I didn't want him to go through this alone."

They had been unable to locate to Ernie's parents and presumed Tom had killed them after Ernie's escape from Hogwarts.

Neville slumped into the other chair. "He saved me. A wall collapsed and he pushed me out of the way. He was so brave and now he's going to die."

"I wish I could offer you more hope," Sirius said, aware that it was a losing battle. "Unfortunately most of his injuries are from being crushed and even though the doctors have tried, like me, they don't hold out much hope."

A tearful Neville took a barely recognizable Ernie's hand. "Come on, Ern. Fight this."

Ernie, however, didn't respond. Sirius placed a hand on Neville's shoulder. "Can you stay with him while I try to find out if there's any news of Parvati?"

"Yeah," Neville said, not turning around.

Sirius returned a short time later to discover Neville was sitting outside of the room. "Ernie?"

Neville shook his head, tears running down his cheeks. "He didn't make it, Sirius."

Sirius, who had lost several patients before, felt just as bad. "I'm really sorry."

Neville visibly tried to pull himself together. "Is there any more news on Remus' condition and have you found the others?"

"I'll tell you when we get home," Sirius said in a grave voice, before handing over yet another calming potion to Neville. "Come on."

When they got home, they discovered that Hermione was feeling a little better but she deflated upon seeing Sirius and Neville's faces. "How bad is it?"

Neville was tearful, pale and shaking as he slumped into a chair. "I need to sit down."

Harry struggled to find his voice. "It's that bad?"

Neville drooped and put his face in his hands and so Sirius took over. "I'll give you the good news first: Remus has lapsed into a coma, but at least he's alive. Although I have to be honest, his prognosis still isn't good."

"The others?" Harry asked.

Sirius reached into his pocket and took out vials of calming potion, passing both of them to Hermione and Harry. "Take them."

Both of them did so, and so they were numb as Sirius told them that Ernie had died.

Neville looked up, his voice sounding unbelieving. "He was a mess, Harry. I barely recognized him and..." He broke off, unable to go on but unable to cry. Sirius pulled him against him, feeling him shaking.

Harry closed his eyes as he thought about how close he and Ernie had become, something that had never really happened while they had been together in Hufflepuff. "What about Parvati?"

Sirius knew that this news would be the most unwelcome. "I still haven't been able to track her down."

"Do you think Tom has her?" Harry asked, thinking about their missing girl.

"To be honest, yes," Sirius said, as all the sweeps of hospitals, both Muggle and magical had come back negative. "And if he has, there's little we can do."

"Oh God, this is awful," Hermione said in a soft and pain filled voice before she turned into Harry's arms, needing him to hold her.

Sirius released Neville. "I'll head back to the hospitals – I need to check in on Remus and the others again."

"Thanks," Harry said distractedly. "Let me know if you find anything out."

Not waiting for the door to close, Neville looked askance at Harry. "Aren't you telling him about Belvedere House?"

"Belvedere House?" Sirius asked, halting in his journey.

"I'm going to free the Aurors," Harry told him, not having much other choice but to tell Sirius what he had planned. "But I know that Remus thinks we should wait longer and would think it a bad idea."

"So do I," Neville said, agreeing with Remus' previous prognosis. "And I think you should tell him that..."

Neville never saw Harry's obliviation spell coming and was none the wiser as he left the room, Harry having told him he was about to leave to check on Luna and the others.

Sirius was a little taken aback at Harry's ruthlessness. "Are you going to do the same to me?"

"Are you going to tell Remus when he comes out of his coma?" Harry refused to let himself believe that Remus wouldn't make it.

"No, because I believe you're going to need my help," Sirius said.

Hermione let them know how she felt about their plans. "What about if there are Death Eaters with the girls? You could end up getting hurt or they could alert Tom."

"Then I'll have to make sure they don't," Harry said in a cool voice.

Hermione blanched as Harry's meaning became apparent. "You can't kill them. You'd be as bad as him."

Sirius thought differently. "Hermione, you've often said yourself we have to make sacrifices, and this time it's his side that is going to make them."

"You shouldn't be encouraging him," Hermione said in a scandalized voice. "If Harry starts killing, then he'll slip faster than he's already doing."

"I'm not slipping," Harry snapped, disliking any talk that he might be going down a very dark and dangerous path.

"Then give me your wands," Hermione demanded. "And let's see how long you manage without them."

Harry immediately unstrapped them and handed them to his girlfriend, watching as they vanished from view into her invisible holster. "I'm going with Sirius to see Justin."

"You feel up to this?"

"It was only my finger that was splinched," Harry said, wiggling his hand to show he was okay, Sirius' treatment dealing with the problem as if it had never happened. "I'll be back later." He then walked out.

Sirius followed him, determined to find out exactly what his godson had planned for Belvedere House.

Less than an hour later, Harry was back and it was immediately apparent to Hermione that he was suffering. "You need your wands, don't you?"

Harry was shivering, as well as feeling nauseated and his head hurt, and although he didn't mean to, he took out his pain on Hermione. "That's stating the fucking obvious, isn't it?"

Hermione, however, had already been warned by Remus what to expect if this ever happened. Unfortunately, she was not in position to defend herself against an angry Harry, nor was it the right time to put him through withdrawal. Reluctantly she unstrapped his wands. "Here."

Harry cast a spell immediately, a cloud of darts appearing, and he dispersed them before flopping down into a chair, still shaking. "I'm sorry."

"But you're not sorry enough to change your plans, are you?" Hermione asked, before pleading once more with her boyfriend. "Please, Harry, reconsider." When Harry refused, Hermione looked mutinously at him. "Then if you and Sirius are going, I'm going with you."

Harry refused. "You'd be a diversion, Hermione, and I know you don't have what it takes to kill someone in cold blood, because that might happen if we run into trouble."

"Neither do you have it in you," Hermione almost yelled at him, although deep down she suspected differently.

Harry agreed with Hermione's inner fears. "You know you're wrong."

All the fight went out of Hermione at Harry's words. "Harry, please don't do this."

"I have to," Harry said stubbornly. "Now let's change the subject."

Sirius interrupted them moments later, his face drawn. "We're losing Remus."

Harry shot to his feet and vanished, uncaring if anyone saw him as he arrived in Remus' room, startling the nurse.

Sirius, who had done the same, immediately obliviated her and sent her on her way.

As Sirius checked him over, it was clear that Remus was, as Sirius had said, losing the battle. Harry was in tears as he held Remus' hand. "There's nothing you can do?"

Sirius shook his head. "He's been lucky to survive for this long and now his magical core is failing, although the Muggle doctors don't realize this, and it's this that's causing multiple organ failure."

"What about a suspension potion?" Harry asked, clutching at straws.

"It would only delay the inevitable," Sirius said with a heavy heart as Remus' breathing began to become labored. "I don't think he's got much longer."

Harry looked over at the man he more or less considered his father. "How about if he received an injection of magic, like when Remus took Ginny's magic to give to Luna?"

"It would leave you far too weak to fight Tom, Harry, and it might leave you a squib if it doesn't go right." Sirius therefore made a suggestion. "You could take mine."

Harry shook his head. "I have no idea how to cast the spell properly."

"And I've never done it before either," Sirius argued.

"But you can temper spells..." Harry saw the look on Sirius' face and he stopped him in his tracks. "Giving the Dark Mark has to be a whole different thing from a medical transfer."

"True," Sirius had to own, before going on, "but if this goes wrong, Harry, you know what could happen."

"Better that than losing a member of my family," Harry said, before he stood up and grasped Sirius by the arms. "So, can it be done?"

Sirius nodded. "Yes."

"Then let's do it," Harry said firmly as Remus gave a shuddering breath that to Harry sounded as if he was choking.

Aware that Remus was extremely close to death, Sirius hurriedly sat Harry down. "This will be exactly the same as when Remus took Ginny's magic and gave it to Luna. You can't move no matter how uncomfortable this feels. You'll kill Remus if you break the link."

Harry understood. "I'm ready."

As Remus' breathing seemed to hitch, Sirius took aim. "Executio Magus Abalienato Remus Lupin."

Within moments, Harry began to feel sick and dizzy as well as in considerable pain, but he did as Sirius asked and kept still.

A few seconds later, Sirius could see Remus gaining more color as the spell continued, and after a few seconds more, he cut it off, deciding that he couldn't risk draining Harry dry. "Finite."

Harry let out a gasp and collapsed forward and would have hit the ground if Sirius hadn't caught him. "That was horrible."

"I just hope I didn't take too much magic," Sirius said, vanishing with Harry and reappearing in Luna's bedroom. "I want someone to keep an eye on you tonight, especially after what happened to Luna when she received her magic. Hermione's splinching and injuries were far worse than yours and she's in no condition to keep an eye on you, so Luna can."

Harry didn't even register Sirius' comment as the combination of the attack earlier and his loss of magic caught up with him and he closed his eyes and slipped into a deep sleep. After running his wand over Harry and deciding he would be okay, Sirius headed downstairs to brief Luna on what had happened.

Luna, who was sitting with a distressed Neville, pointed out something that Sirius hadn't spotted. "Sirius, what about Emily Bradford? She went out with the others."

Sirius put her mind at rest, although he realized he had left the Auror off the list when he had told Harry about the others. "She's got a

broken wrist and is resting in her room. And she was able to explain in more detail about what happened."

"What did happen?" Luna asked.

"Apparently forty Death Eaters appeared and destroyed Remus' grandparents' home, killing them and almost killing Remus, who is now going to be okay thanks to Harry giving him some of his magic."

Neville's eyes widened. "He gave up some of his magic?"

"Remus would have died if he hadn't," Sirius explained. "And just like Luna, if Harry needs more, he can take it from someone else."

"I'm not sure Harry would ever do that," Luna said.

"I think you might find out that you're wrong." Sirius then went back to the discussion of the attack. "Anyway, everybody else was hurt when the Death Eaters attacked the Museum and the shops surrounding the area. Obviously Tom decided to do more than just attack Remus' grandparents."

"I still don't know how he knew we were there," Neville said.

"I don't think he did," Sirius surmised, now that he knew more about the attack. "I think this attack was directed at Remus."

Luna's eyes widened as much as Neville's had a moment ago. "Tom knows about the Cup."

"I agree," Sirius said, having come to the same conclusion. "It's too much of a coincidence that it vanished a week ago and now there's an attack on Remus' family."

"Do you think he went to get the Cup?"

Sirius shook his head in response to Neville's question. "No, I think Gringotts sent Draco an updated bank statement – it would have listed the withdrawal."

"I'm surprised Malfoy had the guts to tell Tom," Neville noted, aware that at heart Draco was nothing but a coward.

"Tom doesn't treat those who hide things from him that nicely," Sirius said, having had to patch up some of the people afterwards. "Draco must have decided that coming clean was the better option. He'd have been punished but not as badly."

"And old man Malfoy wouldn't have wanted anyone to find out so you wouldn't have been called," Neville guessed.

"Do you think Tom worked it out, how we did it?" Luna asked after they had fallen silent.

"Probably, which definitely means that Lucy won't be able to return home," Sirius said before getting to his feet. "And speaking of Lucy, I need to go back to the Muggle hospitals and check on everyone. Luna, I need you to keep an eye on Harry tonight."

"I'll do it," Neville said. "Luna can sleep in with Hermione."

"Then I'll see you both in the morning."

Sirius subsequently spent most of the night checking on those in his care at Potter Place and at the two hospitals. Morning found him snoozing in a chair at Remus' bedside.

Remus opened his eyes. "Sirius?"

Sirius blearily opened his eyes and stretched, before climbing tiredly to his feet. "Let me check you over."

"I feel fine," Remus said, although he winced somewhat as pain ripped through his neck as he moved his head. "What hit me?"

"Your grandparents' house," Sirius brusquely said, before he softened his voice. "I'm afraid they didn't make it."

Remus couldn't even remember going to the house. "I was at my grandparents? The last thing I remember is going to bed last night."

Sirius fished in his pocket before holding out a calming potion. "Take this."

"It's bad, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so." Sirius then briefed Remus on what had happened.

"You let Harry give up some of his magic?"

"You'd have died without it and Harry refused to attempt the procedure the other way around," Sirius said in response to Remus' angry question.

This took the wind out of Remus' sails somewhat. "I was that close to death?"

"Another minute or so and it would have all been over," Sirius said. "You're only doing as well as you are right now because of your enhanced metabolism. Another day and you'll be fine."

"So does that mean I can leave?"

"Yes, but after I get you released, I'll side-apparate you," Sirius said.

"I think I can apparate myself," Remus said, loathing the feeling of side-apparition.

"We'll see."

An hour later, after checking Remus out of the hospital, Sirius checked on the others, promising he'd be back to deal with Lucy and the others later that day.

Remus apparated himself home, although he did feel somewhat as he did. Lying down on his bed, he let out a deep breath. "I feel a little dizzy."

"Bloody idiot," Sirius said as he ran his wand over him. "You still aren't yourself and your magical core is still recovering. I knew I shouldn't have listened to you."

"But you did," Remus said and he closed his eyes. "I think I'm going to sleep."

Four hours later everybody except for Justin was home and Remus opened his eyes to see Harry sitting next to his bedside. "Harry, how are you feeling?"

"Wiped," Harry admitted. "But I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I owe you a life debt."

"You don't owe me anything," Harry said, not wanting Remus indebted to him. "I'm just glad you're alive. I don't know..." Here Harry choked up.

Remus swung his legs over the bed and pulled Harry into his arms. "It's okay, Harry."

Harry began to cry, letting the pent-up tension dissolve, before he finally wiped his eyes and said, "I really thought I was going to lose you."

"I really appreciate what you did, but you shouldn't have sacrificed your magic for me," Remus said. "You should have let me die."

"No, I shouldn't have," Harry said, not surprised that Remus had taken that stance. "I've already lost one dad and I didn't want to lose another one."

Before Remus could respond, Sirius came dashing into the room. "Tom's struck again."

Harry shot to his feet, swaying a little as he still wasn't himself. "What has he done?"

Sirius met Remus' eyes before saying, "I'm so sorry but he's killed the Weasleys."

"All of them?" Harry asked in horror.

"No," Sirius said, before relaying what he knew. "Ginny's hand is at 'mortal danger' and Bill's hand is still showing him as being 'out'."

Harry promptly dissolved into tears once again.

Next Chapter: Harry attacks Remus; Sirius does something he knows the others wouldn't approve of.

hapter 65: Downward Spiral

As Remus reached for Harry, Harry suddenly shook his head. "No! I can't fall apart right now. We need to see if anyone is still alive."

Sirius hurried over to the fireplace in Remus' room, throwing in floo power. "Dragon Reserve."

A dirt and blood covered Tula appeared a short time later, and it was obvious she had been crying. Harry almost collapsed with relief as Remus hurriedly took Sirius' place.

"Tula, are you okay?"

"Yes, but Charlie..."

"I know," Remus said, before he gently asked, "What happened?"

"The attack came out of nowhere," Tula said as she recognized Remus, her voice trembling. "We were outnumbered five to one. George was killed and Charlie and I tried to hide by taking refuge inside Regina's pen when it became evident that we were outnumbered. The Death Eaters turned on Regina and bombarded her with blasting and fire throwing spells until she went down. Then they overpowered us and dragged us into the center of the reserve." She started to cry unrestrainedly. "Charlie begged the leader to let me go, and he said they would after Charlie was dead. The leader then tortured him and afterwards he... he hurt me. And he left a message for you."

Remus had not expected this. "A message?"

"Yes, he said that it was retribution for taking the Hufflepuff Cup as he knows that it had to be you and, if you do anything else, then Tom will make sure there's another example," Tula said, her sobs completely unreserved.

"Do you want to come here?" Remus asked gently, although he already knew there was more to Tula's message than met the eye. "I can provide you with shelter."

"Yes," Tula said. "But I'll need to portkey somewhere."

"Go to where Charlie took Harry on his last day at the Dragon Reserve," Remus said. "I'll be waiting for you."

As he ended the connection, Sirius grabbed Remus' arm. "This could be a trap."

Remus acknowledged Sirius' words. "Of course it's a trap but whoever this leader is, I suspect he'll be expecting more than just me, which means that one person stands more chance of getting in and out without detection." Remus then began to drag out clothing and check his wands, thankful they hadn't been destroyed in the attack on his grandparents' home. "And that person is going to be me, Sirius. My lupine skills give me an advantage nobody else has."

Sirius scowled at Remus. "You're only just back on your feet."

Remus was well aware of that, still not quite feeling like his usual self. "I know I'm still not back to normal yet but even so I'm still stronger and faster than you."

Although reluctant to back down, Sirius finally agreed.

Romania

As Sirius had expected, it was indeed a trap, and Remus recognized who was waiting to spring it, even though his face was hidden by the silver mask. And through the window he was currently peering in, Remus could also see a naked Tula tied up on the floor close to the door.

One of the Death Eaters kicked out at Tula as she sobbed.

"Shut up for Merlin's sake or I'll give you something to cry about."

"Even though he said he would, do you really think Lupin will come?" one of the other Death Eaters asked their leader.

"Just like Potter used to, Lupin always did have a noble streak," the leader said, his voice filled with disgust. "And knowing that, I'm almost certain Lupin and his friends won't leave this one, but if they do, she'll die knowing Lupin was a coward."

Remus' hackles went up at the slur, and he wished that Tula was closer to the man Remus was sure was Snape; he would have taken the chance of grabbing them both to find out for certain but unfortunately Tula was too far away and Remus knew what would happen to her if he chose to take Snape instead of her. Hoping his pseudo Dark Mark would hold up against the wards he could feel buzzing, Remus apparated in, stumbling on arrival and knocking against a table, evidence that he still wasn't well. Unfortunately it was enough to alert Snape to his presence and the Death Eater span around.

Firing off a Killing Curse towards the spot that Remus had apparated into, Severus barked out, "Grab that girl."

Two Death Eaters shot forward just as Remus did the same, his speed allowing him to avoid the green light that barreled his way. As he grabbed Tula, so did the two Death Eaters that had reacted to Snape's order. However, even if meant taking them with him, Remus knew he'd have to take the chance and he yelled out, "Homeward Bound."

Thankfully Sirius and the others were waiting when he reappeared in the hallway of Potter Place, and they pulled their wands on the two Death Eaters who had managed to come along for the ride.

Sirius taunted them. "Go ahead. Take a shot. I'd be happy to kill you where you stand."

One of the Death Eaters did just that, and several stunners took him down, before the same happened to the other one.

After they were disarmed, Sirius side-apparated both men into the cell they usually locked Remus in during the full moon.

Meanwhile, Remus shoved his wand into Tula's hand and demanded an oath from her, before releasing her after she gave it. "Sorry, but given you were part of a trap I had to check."

"I'm sorry but they made me," Tula wept as Remus draped over her the tablecloth that Luna had hurriedly grabbed. "I tried to fight them but I couldn't."

"It's going to be okay," Remus said, helping her to her feet as Sirius reappeared beside him, making Tula draw back. "Tula, this is Sirius Black and he's on our side. Yes, I know he's supposed to be dead but he's not. He is, however, our resident healer, and he's going to take good care of you."

Sirius came back a short time later, his face grim. "She'll be okay but her rape was brutal to say the least. I'm just glad I could use magic to heal her."

Harry had always liked the kind woman. "Did she say who did it or is that a stupid question?"

"Not exactly," Sirius said, pouring himself a Scotch. "I think it was whichever Inner Circle member was in attendance."

"Snape," Remus said in a disgusted voice. "I'd recognize that bastard anywhere."

Harry threw his glass of Scotch at the wall. "I hate that man."

"Harry, you're going to have to face him again when you return to Hogwarts in September," a now recovered Hermione reminded him as she used her wand to clean up the mess. "Are you going to be able to do it?"

"Yes," Harry said angrily. "Because I'm going with the adage that revenge is a dish best served cold. And believe me when I say that I intend to get revenge on him and on Tom for what they've done to my friends."

Walking into the room, Emily Bradford took Sirius' Scotch from him and took a mouthful. "Thanks."

"I'll get myself another," Sirius said, understanding Emily's need. She had been in the room with him when he had examined Tula. "Will you be okay?"

"Yes, but I suspect you might need to do a little obliviation on Tula now that I've got her sworn statement," Emily said bleakly. "I don't imagine it's a memory she'll wish to retain."

"I'll do it when she wakes up," Sirius said, having provided Emily with a sedative to give to Tula once Emily had finished her questioning.

"Where are we going to put her?" Emily asked. "Potter Place is fit to burst and Lucy and her lot are in Remus' house, and Harry still needs to go to Gringotts if he wants to get the keys for the Potter Estate."

"Something he's not going to be doing," Remus said, not willing to risk Harry's safety in going there, now that it was evident that Tom knew it was Remus who had infiltrated Gringotts.

Harry turned to Sirius. "Which means that although I know you hate Grimmauld Place, I think you're going to have to deal with cleaning it up for when we eventually get the women out of Belvedere House." Harry still hadn't told Remus of his idea to bring forward their plans and until he was certain he could pull them off alone, he had no intention of doing so.

"My complaining about it seems pretty pathetic after what has gone on," Sirius said, although he still loathed his childhood home. "I'll take another look at it in a few days' time and catalogue what needs doing. But in the meantime, I think we should try and track down Bill Weasley. It's obvious Tom will take him out next, and I'm not sure Ron could stand to lose anyone else."

Emily agreed. "I know he's just one man but given the lack of firepower on our side, we need everyone we can get."

"What about Ginny?" Luna asked.

Pansy, who had joined them after receiving a message that morning, shook her head. "They've got her locked in the dungeons at Tom's home. I can't get near them and I don't know what they're planning to do her. Mother didn't mention her and I didn't want her to know that I'm aware they have her."

"Just keep monitoring," Remus said, not wanting Pansy to endanger herself unnecessarily. "You're not to risk yourself for Ginny."

"Don't worry, there's no chance of me doing that," Pansy said firmly. "She's the last person I'd risk my life for."

Talk then turned to Justin's ongoing recovery and the news that they'd received of Cordelia.

Two Days Later – No. 12 Grimmauld Place

Sirius brushed off the dust that fell as he pushed the curtain aside from the door. A portrait of his mother was hanging to his left and it began screaming at him the moment he set foot inside the house. Noticing a curtain, Sirius tugged it across to cover the woman up. "I need to find a way to remove that hag if we move the Aurors into here."

Julian was dismayed at the state of the place. "It's more than a little dirty, Uncle Sirius." He had asked if he could call Sirius 'Uncle' and Sirius had delightedly agreed.

"No-one's lived here for years," Sirius reminded him as he led everyone down the corridor and towards the kitchen. "Let's go look in here."

Lucy bit back a scream as a rat ran across the kitchen table. "You're going to have to gut and fumigate it to make it livable." She could see what looked like cockroaches on the counters. "Actually, after this I think I'm going to have to fumigate me!"

"We'll check upstairs before coming back down," Sirius decided.

As they made their way up the darkened and creaking staircase, Julian could see what looked like mold growing on the walls. "That isn't good." He looked up. "How many floors?"

Sirius followed his train of sight. "Four. Reg once dangled me from the very top. I can't stand heights because of it. Not that it makes much difference now. I can't change anything."

"You can't beat yourself up over your brother," Remus said, as he stepped onto the landing. "He made his decision how he wished to live his life, and you made yours. You had the same upbringing and pressures, so don't blame yourself because he was weak and gave into the Dark Arts."

Sirius decided that a change in subject was in order and he led everyone to the end of the hallway. "This was my room."

As he swung the door open, Julian could see a moth-eaten Gryffindor scarf clinging to the walls, what had to be pictures of Muggle models, as they weren't moving, and a massive four poster bed dominating the room. "I'm surprised from what you've told me about your parents that they didn't pull those down."

Sirius grinned as he looked at the faded posters. "I found a spell to stick them to the wall forever. It can't be undone – not unless you remove the walls I suppose."

"Where did you get Muggle posters from?" Lucy asked, more than a little intrigued.

"Gary Entwistle, a Muggle-born." Sirius found himself lost in the past for a moment as he remembered the former Hufflepuff. "I wonder what happened to him?"

"Perhaps you should look him up when this over," Lucy suggested. "Make contact with old friends again."

"We weren't friends," Remus said as he led the pair out, suddenly not wanting to stay in the oppressive room. "He was just a kid who was able to get us things and, in Sirius' case, something that he knew would drive his parents insane."

Sirius gave a wry smile. "Yep, and they beat me for it, of course, but it was worth it."

"Your parents sound as bad as your brother," Lucy said in dismay, not pulling her punches.

"You can't choose your family," Sirius said lightly. "Let's look at the other rooms."

After going into every bedroom, Remus shook his head. "It would cost a fortune to bring this place up to scratch – I think we're going to have to look for other solutions."

"Why weren't there any house-elves here?" Julian asked in surprise.

"They would have all died out," Sirius said, as he headed back downstairs. "Perhaps upstairs is in better shape." After discovering that it wasn't, the group headed back downstairs.

Once downstairs, Julian looked at the line of doors that surrounded the large corridor. "I'll take the right with Remus."

"Be careful," Sirius warned, as he flicked his wand at all of the doors, opening them. "Don't touch anything. Just assess each room, and when that's done, we can get out of here."

Remus wandered along, grimacing as if in pain as he reviewed each room, all of them as bad as the kitchen had been. The final room also had a moldering appearance, it was mostly empty, except for three rows of small portraits on the far wall, a desk in the middle of the room and a large tapestry that covered an entire wall. "You might find this of interest. It's the tapestry Sirius told you about."

"It's larger than I expected." In the dim light, Julian could see several blackened holes in the tapestry by the dim light that was coming in through the crumbling curtains. Spotting a letter opener on the desk, he used it to push the curtains aside.

With light streaming into the room, Remus was able to see the family tree more closely, smiling as he spotted a Weasley on there. Looking down he spotted the name of Regulus, his date of birth and death, and a blackened hole to its right where Sirius' name had once been. However, what he noticed next to Regulus' name made him step back in shock. "Merlin!"

Julian moved to stand beside him. "That's a bit of a bombshell."

"Sirius!" Remus yelled at the top of his voice. "Sirius!"

Sirius came running in. "Are you hurt?"

Remus shook her head. "No, but look!"

By now Lucy had also joined them as Sirius paled almost to the color of milk, before recovering himself. "I never expected that."

Julian gave Sirius a small smile. "It certainly gets me off the hook."

"You truly didn't want to be my heir, did you?"

"Not in the slightest," Julian said. "Although I think you're going to have some explaining to do when we get back to Potter Place."

Sirius knew that was an understatement as he ran his eyes over the tapestry before letting out a sigh of relief. "Andy's still alive somewhere."

Remus looked at the blackened hole Sirius was staring at, the date of birth still legible and he could see no date of death. "That's good to know, although I wonder where she is. It's a pity that Tonks' name never made it on here."

"I could change the tapestry to include the offspring of all those blasted off now that I own this house," Sirius said, aiming his wand at it. "At least I think I can."

He could and, as the tapestry knitted itself back together, Ted Tonks' name appeared together with his date of death before the name of Nymphadora appeared; hers however, had no date of death. "Wherever she is, she's alive, although we have no idea where she is."

"Well there's not much we can do here at the moment, so let's go back to Potter Place," Remus suggested.

Justin was lying in his bed reading a book when the door opened and Sirius and Remus came in, Sirius looking grave.

"You look like you have bad news."

"It depends how you look at it," Sirius said, sitting down on the edge of the large double bed. "How are you feeling today?"

"Glad that re-growing my spine is over but still a little fragile," Justin said, being truthful. "Is Mum okay?"

When she had heard the news about Justin, Cordelia had wanted to fly over from Sydney but given that she was two months' pregnant, news that had cheered Justin up, Remus had stopped her from doing so, telling her he'd keep her posted about Justin's progress and assuring her that he'd make a full recovery.

"Cordie is doing fine apart from the morning sickness," Remus said.

"So what is the news you have?" Justin asked. "Have you found Parvati?"

Parvati was still missing and despite everyone's best efforts, including Pansy's, nobody had been able to locate her.

"No, it's to do with Grimmauld Place."

"I forgot you were going there today," Justin said, before jumping to the wrong conclusion. "If you need money to do it up, you're welcome to use my trust fund – there's still plenty left in it."

"It isn't that," Sirius said, not quite knowing how to say it.

Remus could feel Sirius struggling and so he took over from his friend. "We looked at the family tapestry when we were there. Julian found out that he's, as he put it, off the hook as far as being Sirius' heir is concerned."

"You mean you found somebody else?" Justin asked, thinking that Sirius was looking worried. "Is it someone awful?"

"No," Sirius said, feeling he should be the one to break the news. "It's you."

Used to Sirius' jokes, Justin burst out laughing. "That's one of your best yet."

"He's not joking," Remus said, sitting down on Justin's other side. "You're the Black heir, Justin, or at least you could be."

Justin stopped laughing, he knew Remus well enough to know he wasn't lying. "That can't be possible. I have no heir ring – Julian has it."

"That's because you're illegitimate," Sirius said.

Justin suddenly felt a little queasy. "You mean you and Mum...?"

"No!" Sirius exclaimed. "You're Regulus' son."

"But he was a Death Eater," Justin said in horror.

"I doubt your mother knew," Remus surmised. "It isn't something everyone goes around telling people."

"What did she know about him?" Sirius knew he was being somewhat nosey, but given the circumstances, he wondered how his brother had managed to bed Cordelia.

"Not much as far as I know," Justin said. "She just told me that he ran into her outside of a pub in Somerset, a pub she never managed to find again."

"Probably because it was a wizarding pub," Sirius guessed. "And don't tell me, he fed her a sob story to get her into bed."

Sirius had gotten it right for Justin nodded. "Mum said that Artie, as he called himself, tricked her into bed by listening to her problems with her parents, by telling her he had similar issues so she'd feel sympathy for him, and by telling her that he thought they might have a future together."

"And Regulus Arcturus Black was lying," Sirius said in disgust.

"At least I know who Artie was now," Justin responded. "And I suppose I should be grateful. I thought when Father died that I had no family, apart from Mum and Harry, left." He looked hopefully at Sirius, whom he got on really well with. "If you're happy with me being part of your family, of course."

"So if you want to be part of the family, does this mean that you're willing to consider becoming my heir?" Sirius asked, hopeful that Justin's response meant exactly that. "As you know, just like me, Julian has Filius Superstes and he can inherit but again, like me, he won't sacrifice a woman to beget a male heir."

By now, Justin understood the importance of an heir to Sirius. "I thought the Blacks didn't allow adoptive heirs and isn't that what I'd be?"

"No, you're already a Black, courtesy of Regulus and his inability to act responsibly, but unless I officially acknowledge that, because

you were born out of wedlock, you could never inherit. However, if I was to make you my son, then your Black blood would ensure the succession of the line."

"And what about Mum?" Justin asked. "Would she still be my mother?"

"Of course," Sirius said. "The adoption would, however, make you my son."

Justin brought up a very good point. "Even if Mum agrees, how do you know I don't have Filius Superstes? Because if I did, it would be a waste of time adopting me."

"I don't know if you have it," Sirius had to admit. "But just as I did with Julian, I can run a simple test to determine whether you do or not."

"Now?" Justin asked, suddenly feeling as though it was the most urgent thing in the world, even though it obviously wasn't.

"I'll fetch what you need," Remus offered, allowing Sirius and Justin a little time alone.

Sirius could see that Justin suddenly felt uncomfortable and he tried to put him at ease. "I know this must be a massive shock to you."

"Vice versa," Justin said, realizing that Sirius must have had as big a shock as he had. He gave a smile. "It certainly explains where I get my dueling skills from."

Sirius smiled back. "It certainly does, although Reg was nowhere near as good as I am."

"Do you think I'll get to be that good?"

"I don't know but you're better than Reg ever was," Sirius said. "You already outclass Harry on occasion."

"I was really shocked that I beat him the last time we fought," Justin said, unable to keep the pleasure out of his voice. "I really thought he was unbeatable, except by you, of course."

"He's going to be easier to beat now that he's given up some of his magic to Remus," Sirius reminded Justin. "Although there still won't be many who will be able to take him on and win."

The discussion was halted as Remus apparated back into the room. "I have what you need, I think."

Not having been there when Julian had been tested, Justin watched patiently as Sirius summoned a small amount of blood from him before putting a few ingredients into a cauldron, adding distilled water and finally the blood. "How will you know?"

"The potion will turn black if it's positive," Sirius said.

All three watched in silence as the potion began to hiss and bubble before suddenly it became calm and went completely clear.

Sirius let out a sigh of relief. "You're clean, Justin." He then turned around to face him. "Now we know for certain, I want you to think long and hard before you agree to what I want. If you accept, you'll become my heir and you'll inherit almost everything I own. However, even though it's not patently obvious at the moment, given the current state of affairs, the Black name comes with more than just money. You would have a seat on the Wizengamot, something I have never had the chance to take up. After I die, you would also be responsible for taking care of whomever I eventually marry and any other siblings to whom my wife may give birth. I can set up small trust funds for any more children I may have but it cannot amount to more than one percent of my wealth."

"That's rather archaic," Justin noted.

"Unfortunately it is but I cannot change what has been set down," Sirius said. "There's more."

Justin listened patiently as Sirius outlined what else he would have to learn. When Sirius came to an end, he asked a question. "If I say no, then what happens to your money? Couldn't you simply just spend it all?"

"No," Sirius said. "It was also laid down that the current Black head of house could only spend forty percent of whatever wealth he has

available to him, to stop anyone from bankrupting future generations."

"Your ancestors certainly thought this one out," Justin remarked, before asking another question. "Where do I sign?"

"This isn't a joke, Justin," Sirius said in a stern voice.

Justin answered in just as grave a tone. "I know, but I'm feeling a little overwhelmed at the moment and this is my way of dealing with that."

Sirius apologized. "Sorry, but I'm about to make that feeling even more overwhelming. I'd like to make you my heir sooner rather than later. At the moment you're illegitimate and if something should happen to me, everything would still go to Julian, who like me, won't have a son. And so, I'd like to do this now."

"I need to talk to Mum first," Justin said.

Remus led Sirius into his room after they left Justin. "I thought you weren't that bothered about the Black inheritance."

"I honestly thought I wasn't," Sirius said truthfully. "But when I learnt about Julian that changed and I suddenly felt relieved to know that it wouldn't go to Draco Malfoy. Then of course, finding out about Julian's problem made things difficult again and I had no idea who the heir would be. Finding out about Justin came as a big relief."

"He still hasn't said yes yet," Remus reminded Sirius.

"Do you think he will?" Sirius asked, worry tingeing his voice.

"If Cordie's happy about it, he will," Remus said confidently. "Wait and see."

Two days went by before Justin was finally deemed fit enough to be moved from his bed and was able to use a telephone, which meant sneaking into the same Muggle house that Remus had been using to make calls to Cordelia in Australia, the owners being on holiday. Justin had explained that the owners would find out when they returned but given that Remus was going to leave an envelope with

enough Muggle money to cover the calls and a note, he didn't feel too guilty.

When he finally returned to Potter Place, Justin sought out Sirius. "I'd like to take you up on your offer. Mum wants me to be part of your family and she said that as long as Julian is certain about not wanting to be your heir, then I should do what makes me happy."

"And this will make you happy?"

Justin nodded and made a confession. "I've been rather jealous of Harry and Remus, so it's going to be nice to have a sort of parent around again and I never really got on that well with my adoptive father."

"I'm not quite sure I'm parent material," Sirius said, never having really looked at the heir issue that way, although he knew if he went ahead with the adoption, Justin would technically become his son.

Justin decided to lighten the mood. "So, Sirius, you don't think I should call you 'Dad'?"

Sirius didn't take Justin seriously but he did have a serious response. "I don't think we're quite there yet but if one day you truly feel for me what Harry does for Remus, then my answer will be yes. For the moment, I think we should settle for 'Uncle Sirius', just as Julian does."

Justin had been joking but he discovered that Sirius' answer actually meant a lot to him. "I think I'd like that."

As he left the study, Justin felt happy and he hoped that one day he would be able to look at Sirius in the same way Harry looked at Remus. However, things were destined to change for Remus and Harry and not in a good way.

7th November 1998

Harry and Sirius entered Laurifer Manor, Harry noticing that they weren't alone. Harry whispered quietly to Sirius as they stood watching other Death Eaters assemble, "Do you think it's going to be another attack?"

"It's not," Sirius said as he looked around. "But I can't tell you what it is."

Harry was well aware that Tom had requested Sirius' presence earlier that day and he now realized that it had to have been something to do with what was about to happen. A few minutes later, Harry had his answer and as he took in the bloody state of the girl on the stage, he whispered softly, "Oh God!"

"You know as well as I do that Tom likes to lay down the law and he does it by example," Sirius said.

Tom was to prove Sirius correct just moments later as he addressed those gathered in front of him. "You know my laws and the penalty for disobeying them. Ginny Weasley helped a traitor to escape, a traitor who took something from me, and she is going to pay the price tonight for her actions. I did originally intend to treat Miss Weasley as a man for committing the crime of high treason but I have decided to stick with a tradition that dates back to the Treason Act of 1351; the very act that states it is a crime to aid a sovereign's enemy. Therefore, we're going to move this outside where Ginny Weasley will be treated as all treacherous women have been before her."

"He really thinks he's something if he's ranking himself with the monarchy," Harry said as quietly as he could, although the sound of talking from everyone was helping to drown out his voice as they began to shuffle towards the set of double doors that led to the grounds.

"I think that's the least of our problems," Sirius said as they gained entry to the garden where it became apparent exactly what Tom was going to do to Ginny.

Harry hurriedly moved into the shadows of the trees, drawing Sirius with him. "I know I don't like her, but I can't stand by and let him burn her to death."

"Harry, you're not as strong as you were and you can't save her," Sirius said hurriedly, half afraid of what Harry might do. "She's just one person and if you get caught then all the losses we've endured so far will be for naught. So, just as you did on the night they killed

Bones and the others, you're going to have to stand by and doing nothing. I have to go join Tom. Make sure you stay here."

"I can't just stand here and watch," Harry said, his voice catching as he watched as a screaming Ginny was dragged by a rope along the ground, kicking and screaming, to be bound to the post. "I just can't."

"And I can't let you help her."

Harry suddenly found himself frozen in place, and he was unable to protest as Sirius then cast an invisibility spell on him, before Sirius left his side to head off to join Tom. Left behind, Harry struggled against the spells but was unable to break them and so he was forced to stand and listen as Ginny screamed as the faggots surrounding the dais she had been placed on were lit. Thanks to the spell he was also unable to close his eyes, making Ginny's demise even harder to endure.

Suddenly a crack of thunder echoed through the night and heavy rain began to fall.

Standing in front of the burning dais, Tom gave an exasperated sigh. "Of all the times for a storm to appear."

Sirius glanced up at the dais where Ginny had fallen silent a minute or so earlier. "I should imagine she's dead by now. Would you like to me to check before we get struck by lightning?"

"Please do."

Sirius doused the flames and moved onto what was left of the flame damaged dais, before aiming his wand at Ginny, who was hanging limply against the ropes that were holding her to the stake. A puff of black smoke appeared above her. "She's dead."

"Get rid of the body," Tom said callously, before dismissing his men.

Sirius turned his wand on Ginny and cast a cremation spell, stepping back hurriedly as flames much hotter than those that had taken her life sprung up around her. Noticing that Tom had gone back inside, Sirius hurried back to where he knew he'd left Harry.

"I'm going to release you in a moment and I know you probably want to kick the crap out of me for what I've done but use your commonsense before you do." He then changed his mind. "Actually I'm going to release you once I reach the door to the house. I'll wait for you in the dining room at Potter Place."

Potter Place

Harry stormed into the dining room to discover that Sirius was not alone. "Didn't want to face me on your own?"

"No, I wanted you to listen while I told everybody what I've done," Sirius said, before he turned to face those assembled. "As you probably noticed from the Weasley family clock, Ginny is dead."

This was obviously a shock to everyone as heads began to shake.

"Did you kill her?"

This came from Ron, who was sitting with Luna and Emsie.

Sirius didn't immediately answer the question, instead saying, "I think this is a conversation best carried on without Emsie and Sophia."

Without delay, Sophia began to protest when her mother agreed with Sirius. "I'm fourteen – I'm old enough to stay!"

"Not this time," Sirius said, not wanting to give the young girl nightmares.

A protesting Sophia was herded out of the room with her sister and then Sirius began to tell everyone what had happened.

"As I said, Ginny is dead. She was burnt at the stake."

Luna had tears come to eyes. "Oh Merlin! That's terrible."

"And tell her who did it," Harry snarled. "Go ahead and tell her."

"I did," Sirius said in a voice devoid of emotion.

"And he wouldn't let me help her. He froze me and made me listen and watch and I couldn't do anything!" Harry's final word came out almost as scream.

Sirius tried to get Harry to see reason. "Harry, there must have been close to two hundred Death Eaters there today. If you'd tried to help her, you'd have died as well."

"Then you could have done something to help her," Harry yelled. "But you didn't because you hated her."

"Yes, I hated her, but I didn't light those faggots because of that. I did it because it was what I knew I had to do to maintain my cover," Sirius said, his face hard. "You said you wanted to take the fight to Tom – I understand that but what I also understand, and you don't seem to, is that just like I did today, you might find yourself having to do some unpleasant things to get your wish, including committing murder."

"Yeah, but at least I'd give a fuck. You certainly didn't." Harry was by now beyond incensed. "You told me the Dark Arts don't change you, but you're wrong."

Now all eyes turned to Sirius but for the wrong reasons and Sirius gave Harry a resigned look before saying, "What Harry is about to blab, if you haven't already guessed, is that I've embraced the Dark Arts, I did it a long time ago."

It was Justin who took this news the hardest. "You were already a Death Eater?"

"No!" Sirius thundered out at Justin. "I never took up this guise until Harry needed help."

"Oh, save it!" Harry said, his tone more than a little disgusted. "It's a role you were born to play."

And oddly enough it was Justin who leapt to Sirius' defense. "Give him a chance to explain."

"Figures you'd defend him now he's making you rich," Harry said, his mouth running away with him.

Justin hit Harry, sending him flying. "Get up!"

Remus stood in between the two young men. "This ends now! Harry, you will apologize to Justin for that remark. You know as well as I do that Justin doesn't need Sirius' money."

"Go to hell!"

After getting to his feet, Harry stormed out, and Hermione, after giving everyone an apologetic glance, went after him.

Justin was still angry as Sirius checked over his hand. "What is wrong with him?"

"The Dark Arts," Sirius said. "He's obviously been practicing harder than we believed."

"But Remus put him through withdrawal before he went back to Hogwarts," Luna protested. "He said he was going to keep his practice to a minimum."

"And he was lying," Remus said.

"But it doesn't explain why he's so upset with Uncle Sirius," Justin said, not being able to figure out why his friend had gone off the deep end.

Sirius suspected he knew why. "Because I made him watch Ginny die. He knew he could do nothing to save her and by blaming me for being in a position where he thought I could, it gave him someone at whom to hit out."

This made Neville really confused. "But you said it was the Dark Arts that was making Harry like this."

"It's giving him a short fuse," Sirius said in explanation. "Normally, although he might have blamed me for not helping Ginny, he would have listened to reason and he would never have lashed out at Justin."

"And I've just made it worse by hitting him," Justin said in a heavy voice.

"No, you didn't," Remus said, defending Justin's actions. "Harry was out of order talking to you like that but now that we know how bad it's gotten, we need to do something about it."

"What will you do?" Neville asked.

"Take away his wands, put him through withdrawal and, this time, leave it until the final possible moment before we administer the sleeping potion," Remus said, having administered it almost immediately the last time he had put Harry through withdrawal, not wanting to see him suffer. "He needs to see what sort of a monster he can be if he's going to stick to the straight and narrow."

"How soon?"

"Next weekend," Remus decided. "I'll need to brush up on Harry's lesson plans and take his place, but I need to get copies of the lessons that Hermione has been sorting out for Harry."

"Is there anything I can do?" Sirius asked.

Remus shook his head. "Not for me."

Sirius immediately thought that Remus was angry with him and said as much. "I know you're angry with me for hiding..."

Remus held up his hand. "Whoa! I'm nothing of the sort. Do you really think I didn't know?"

"Obviously," Sirius said.

Remus laughed. "I would have made a lousy Unspeakable if I missed something as simple as your eyes never changing color when you used the Dark Arts during your duels with Harry."

"Why did you never say anything?"

"I believed that you'd tell me when you were ready," Remus said, before making a confession. "Although I have to be honest and say that I always believed that using the Dark Arts would turn you into some sort of monster."

"As I've told Harry, for some people they're a bad idea," Sirius acknowledged. "But I hated them before I was forced to succumb and that's why I think I'm different, and although I use them now without any ill effect, they're not my first choice, just as what I did today wouldn't have been my first choice." He walked over to Justin. "I'm sorry, Justin. I should have been more honest with you, particularly as I know how upset you were about finding out about Reg and his choices."

"It's okay," Justin said, giving Sirius a hug. "I think I understand."

One by one everyone said that they were okay with Sirius' confession until finally it came down to Ron.

"Out of everyone here you have the right to ask for retribution for what I did to your sister. I'm sorry."

Ron's feelings about his sister had still not changed. "You don't have to apologize. Ginny made her choice and she paid for it with her life. I'm just sorry you had to be the one to do this and, unlike Harry, I don't believe you wanted to do it."

"I admit I didn't like Ginny and that I thought she should be executed, but I would never have chosen for her to go out that way," Sirius said, wanting Ron to understand fully how he had felt about the redhead. "But if I had to choose between having Harry furious with me or Harry dead, then I'd do the same again."

"As would I," Ron said, fully agreeing with Sirius' stance.

After a few questions had been posed to Sirius and he had answered them, they began to make plans about how to deal with Harry, being totally unaware that he had a plan of his own.

The Next Day

Justin shook hands with a repentant Harry. "I'm glad that you're going to accept help, Harry."

Harry gave Justin a smile. "So am I. I should never have spoken to you that way. Is Remus around?"

"He's over at his home with Lucy and Sirius," Justin said, sitting down. "But I know he'll take your place at Hogwarts if you want to dial back on your practice."

"I do," Harry said, shuddering. "I need to. And I think I'm going to take a few days away with Hermione and get my head together. I'll be back on Saturday. Would you mind asking Remus to take my place at school?"

"Of course not," Justin said, although he was surprised that Harry wasn't going to do this himself.

Remus, however, was simply relieved when Justin apparated to tell him. "At least Hermione's with him."

And it was Hermione who sent an owl to Remus telling him what Harry had done...

14th November 1998

"I think we should go into the study," Harry suggested after an angry Remus apparated into Potter Place. "I think I know what this is about."

Remus followed Harry in and shut the door. "Why did you keep your incursion into Belvedere House a secret from me?"

"I didn't want you involved," Harry responded truthfully. "You served my purpose better being out of the way."

"Your purpose?" Remus asked in an astonished voice. "Just who do you think you are?"

"Someone who knows what needs to be done and is doing it."

Remus closed his eyes in dismay. "Before you started teaching at Hogwarts you would never have reacted like this."

"That's because I didn't know what needed to be done. Sirius showed me that on the night Ginny was executed and it was on that night when I saw myself for what I really was: a spineless bastard who was content to sit on the sidelines while his friends took the blows for him," Harry countered, his voice cold.

Hermione came dashing into the study. "Ron told me you two were fighting. Is it true?"

"Ask him," Harry answered almost sulkily.

Hermione turned to Remus. "Were you?"

"Not exactly," Remus said, before continuing to berate Harry. "Harry, what were you thinking? You had no right to carry out that plan without discussing it with me first."

"You'd have sat around and thought of reasons why those women should stay there, spreading their legs like whores," Harry hissed out. "And I was sick of being a party to it."

"So instead you thought it would be a good idea to storm in and kill without mercy!"

"Those Death Eaters deserved it, and I didn't kill unless they tried to kill me first," Harry countered in a belligerent tone. "And I didn't kill everyone."

"Oh, I'm well aware of that. You see, because I'd taken your place at Hogwarts, I was called to Laurifer Manor and, after the Dementor had finished with those Death Eaters you stunned, I was one of those who had the pleasure of dispatching them, but not before I had to torture them first."

Hermione was horrified. "Was it just you doing the torturing?"

"No," Remus said. "Tom seemed to be holding a trial. I was there, so was Sirius and a man named Magnus. We each had two Death Eaters to deal with in the most imaginable way possible. Thankfully I don't think I won."

"I'm so sorry, Remus."

"Which is more than Harry is," Remus remarked, noting that Harry barely showed any remorse at all. He stepped closer to Harry, only for Harry to draw his wands. "Harry, this isn't like you. I just want to help you."

"No, you don't. You just want to be in charge of everything," Harry snapped. "And I'm sick of it."

"Harry, please stop what you're doing and give me your wands."

"No," Harry said, his voice firm. "And if you don't like it, then fire me and get out of my house."

"I'm not going to make it that easy on you," Remus said, his voice filled with dismay. "You need help, Harry."

Harry had heard enough. "Just get the fuck out and don't ever come back." He then added one final hurtful comment. "And you can forget about our supposed relationship moving to a formal level. I'd rather have Tom as a father!"

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, more than a little dismayed at Harry's callousness.

"Don't go there, Hermione," Harry snapped, before barking at Remus, "Go on, get out, before I throw you out."

Remus debated taking Harry on there and then but he was afraid of Hermione getting injured. So instead he decided to stick to their original plan and mouthed 'tomorrow' as Harry turned his head momentarily, and Hermione quickly nodded, before Harry turned back around. Remus then stalked out.

Harry turned to his girlfriend. "Out of everyone I would have thought you would have been the last person to betray me."

"Betray you?"

"Spying on me for him. I know you have to be the one who told him," Harry snapped out. "Perhaps you'd prefer to be with him."

Hermione shook her head in dismay. "I'd never do that, Harry. We're both just worried about you."

"Well, you can stop worrying. I'm fine." Harry then stormed off.

Hermione sat down, her legs shaking. She hardly recognized Harry from the person she thought she knew. Now, not only was Harry

paranoid but he was also short-tempered, sneaky, believed he was right and refused to listen to what anyone else had to say, and she was only too well aware that Remus was correct and that Harry needed help. Help he was going to get tomorrow.

Next Chapter: The plan backfires; Parvati's fate is discovered; Tom announces Arabella Zabini's replacement.

Chapter 66: Dark Days

15th November 1998

Hermione apparated into the field where she had told Remus to meet her in her letter to him about what Harry had done. "Hi."

"Did it go to plan?" Remus asked, detecting how nervous she was.

"Yes," Hermione said, biting her lip.

"Has Harry locked me out of the wards yet?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, why would he?"

"You heard what he said about our relationship, that he'd rather have Tom as a parent," Remus said, reminding her of Harry's words.

Hermione tried to console Remus. "He was angry and lashing out."

Remus knew only too well why Harry had attacked him. "I know that, but given how he reacted yesterday, he's in the final stages of his addiction."

Hermione refused to believe this. "You can't be serious. I know he needs help but there's no way he could have gone downhill that fast since last week."

"Hermione, it can happen that fast," Remus said, having seen it before. "And if he isn't forced through withdrawal within the next few days, I'm afraid we're going to lose him."

"But Sirius..."

"Sirius might be a one-off, Hermione, and I'm not willing to take the chance that Harry will be so lucky."

"But you don't know that he won't."

"No, I don't but what I do know is that right now Harry is dangerous, and although his irritability will fade within a few days as his soul quite literally gives itself to the Darkness, while this happens none of us will be safe, not even you."

"I might be willing to accept that Harry is losing the fight faster than we thought, but I'll never believe he'd hurt me."

"That's what Imelda Johansson thought."

"Who's Imelda Johansson?" Hermione asked, completely thrown by Remus' strange comment.

"She was the wife of an Unspeakable and no, that's not her real name, but the one used in the case files. Anyway, about three years ago, her husband went rogue – he couldn't handle the Dark Arts."

Hermione experienced a cold trickle of fear run down her spine. "What did he do to her?"

"He murdered her and his best friend because he believed Imelda had betrayed him and was having an affair with the best friend. In reality they were just trying to help him." Remus then delivered the worst part. "And then he killed himself."

Hermione put a hand to her mouth. "Oh God! Harry accused me of wanting to be with you, Remus. You don't think he really believes we're having an affair, do you?"

"I don't know," Remus had to say, having no idea what was going on in Harry's mind. "But if he's that paranoid then I'm afraid for your safety if he isn't taken out of the picture and the sooner we do it the better."

"Then perhaps we should go now," Hermione said, before hesitating and saying, "I know what we're doing is for the best but why do I still feel bad about deceiving him like this?"

"Because you're not a duplicitous person by nature and I know that tricking Harry so that you could meet me here was hard for you," Remus said in a soothing voice as he placed a comforting hand on Hermione's shoulder. "But don't worry, we're going to get through this."

"How touching!" Harry remarked, stepping out of the shadows, his face cold and unflinching.

Hermione tugged free of Remus' grasp, her face a picture of disbelief. "Harry! How did you get here?"

"Tsk, ts, Hermione. You should know better than to try to doctor my wine with sleeping potion when I'm wearing my cufflinks."

Hermione had failed to notice. "But how did you find me?"

"A simple tracking spell that I placed on you yesterday."

"You had no right..."

"And you had no fucking right to meet your lover here, but you did," Harry broke in, his voice full of venom as he drew his wand.

Feeling the enmity rolling off Harry, Remus pushed Hermione behind him, although he didn't want to draw his own wand, not wanting to further inflame the situation. "We're not lovers, Harry, we're just trying to help you."

Standing behind Remus, Hermione experienced a terrible feeling of déjà vu, although she had no idea why. "Harry, calm down. This isn't what it seems."

"I think it's exactly what it seems." Harry then repeated the part of the conversation he had overheard. "You're going to take me out of the picture; you feel bad about deceiving me; and what you're doing is hard for you. On the contrary, I'd say it comes very easy, you whore!"

Hermione flinched as a spell hit her, a handprint appearing on her face. "Harry, no!"

"I bet you didn't say no to him," Harry snarled. However his angered expression changed to one of surprise as a spell grazed his shoulder and he slumped to the ground.

Justin stepped out from behind the tree and aimed his wand at Harry. "Accio Harry's wand."

Hermione slumped in relief. "Justin, thank God!"

"Justin, look out!" Remus yelled as Harry vanished and reappeared behind Justin. "He's still got a wand!"

Justin yelped and was thrown backwards as a Reducto spell went through the shield he had belatedly attempted to throw up. As he blacked out he heard Remus yelling at Hermione to leave.

Hermione, however, did nothing of the sort, and joining forces with Remus they faced Harry together.

Harry might have been angry but he was far from stupid and he disappeared from sight, his invisibility cloak masking him.

Hermione gasped. "Remus, we need to..." She didn't finish her sentence as a powerful stunner took her down.

Harry then uncloaked. "So, it's just you and me. Let's make a fight of this."

Now at a point where he was no longer able to beat Harry, even with Harry's reduced magical power, Remus knew he was going to lose before they had even begun but he didn't dare refuse. And he couldn't leave, not with Justin and Hermione both lying prone on the field and so he did the only thing he could and accepted. "Very well."

Harry knew that Remus was expecting him to play fair and he used this to his advantage, not bothering with standard dueling rules, instead simply firing off a spell even as the final syllable of Remus' acceptance left his lips. "Avada Kedavra!"

If Remus had been anything but a werewolf, the speed of the spell would have killed him, and he knew then that Harry was closer to the edge than he might have imagined. "Reducto."

"Nebulosus."

Harry vanished in a sea of fog. Again it was Remus' speed that saved him as the words of the Killing Curse spewed from Harry's lips and Remus dove to the ground before rolling back onto his feet.

Now that he had Remus on the defensive, Harry immediately moved in and began blasting Remus, eventually forcing him to drop his wands. Harry then moved closer, intending to kill him.

Able to determine Harry's intent, Remus tried reasoning with Harry. "Harry, you don't want to do this."

"Actually I do, so if you didn't want me to kill you then you really should have kept your hands off my girlfriend."

As Harry drew to a halt in front of Remus with his wand outstretched, Remus had resigned himself to his fate when an idea came to him. Just as he had done at Hogwarts when Sirius had attacked him, Remus shot forward using all the speed he had. If the situation hadn't been so awful, Remus would have laughed at the astonished look on Harry's face as Remus' fist connected with it. But instead of laughing, Remus winced at the sound of Harry's jaw breaking, but he also knew that the extreme action had been the only way to stop Harry from incanting the Killing Curse.

Although he could say little, Harry could still disapparate, and in agony, he did exactly that.

Remus immediately grabbed Hermione's and his own wands from the ground and scooping Hermione up, he disapparated, reappearing at Justin's side, before vanishing again.

River Dene

Lucy was sitting reading a magazine when Remus appeared with his cargo and she shot to her feet. "What happened to them?"

"Harry did," Remus said in a grim voice as he laid them both on the sofa. "I have to alert the others. You'll be safe here."

Lucy begged to differ, immediately guessing what had happened. "But Harry can get in here."

Remus knew he'd have to change the wards and so he called out for Macclesby. When the house-elf arrived, Remus barked out an order. "I want everyone out of Potter Place and moved here now!"

Reacting to the urgency in his master's voice, Macclesby didn't even stop to acknowledge Remus' orders, vanishing immediately.

Lucy stood up. "I'll contact Anna Jameson and Emily Bradford and tell them they need to lock down their safe houses. Take care of my daughters." She then vanished.

At Potter Place, Sirius knew something had gone wrong the moment Macclesby turned up. "What's happened?"

"I do not know but Master Remus said everyone must leave now and go to his home, Mister Sirius," Macclesby said.

Sirius disappeared and reappeared in Harry's bedroom to discover he was missing from where he'd placed him after Hermione had doctored the wine. "Shit!" He then disappeared again, reappearing in Neville's room where Ron was playing chess with him. "You're both to go to Remus' home now!"

The two young men reacted as swiftly to the urgency in Sirius' voice as Macclesby had done to Remus' and they vanished.

Sirius then headed for his next port of call, disturbing Luna, who was sitting with Julian playing cards. "We're going to Remus' home."

They were unable to argue as Sirius grabbed them, reappearing in Remus' home. It was then Sirius noticed that he had a patient.

"Justin!"

Sirius knelt down and ran his wand over Justin, who was lying on the sofa and he let out a sigh of relief. "It's just a minor wound. What the hell happened and where is Harry?"

"He was wearing his cufflinks and they neutralized the sleeping potion," Hermione said shakily. "He followed me - he said he put a tracking spell on me. Then he started accusing me and Remus of having an affair before he stunned me."

"So how did Justin get hurt?"

Justin explained what happened. "I went to Harry's room to check on him and noticed he had gone, so I went to warn Remus and Hermione, and Harry took me out."

"You should have told me," Sirius said in an annoyed voice.

"I didn't think, I just disappeared," Justin said. "I never imagined I'd find Harry in the middle of a major meltdown."

"Is that why you brought us here?"

"Yes, Ron, it is," Remus said and he saw a look of concern cross Luna's face. "What's up?"

"Pansy, we've forgotten Pansy!"

Everyone had forgotten that Justin had offered Pansy the use of the Muggle flat he had bought using his Finch-Fletchley trust fund after learning about his mother's pregnancy, intending it to be a place for when his mother and Lester came to visit with the baby when it was born, so that they'd have somewhere to stay that wasn't in the magical world, a world Justin knew Lester felt uncomfortable in. It was also a place that everyone used on occasion when they needed a little time alone. That night Pansy had been using it to meet her father in secret.

Remus vanished and reappeared moments later with an indignant Pansy and a rather bemused Patrick in tow.

"What's going on? One moment I'm sitting eating dinner with Dad and then you grab us and vanish."

"Harry's gone off the deep end," Sirius said.

Patrick whistled. "That's not good news. Is it terminal?"

"Yes, he's completely flipped," Justin told him, sitting up and wincing slightly.

Hermione closed her eyes momentarily as she thought about how angry Harry had looked. "He tried to kill Justin."

"I don't think he tried to kill me," Justin responded, defending his friend despite what Harry had done to him. "That was a glancing blow. If Harry had wanted to kill me, believe me, I'd have been dead. I've dueled with him often enough to know that."

"But you can beat Harry," Ron reminded him.

"I've managed it a few times but he's beat me more often," Justin responded.

"Justin was simply an obstacle for Harry in his bid to take me out," Remus said.

"Are you sure?" Ron asked, unable to believe that Harry would truly hurt Remus.

"Since I barely escaped the two Killing Curses Harry sent at me before he disarmed me and then more or less told me he was going to kill me, I have to say yes."

Hermione made a small sound of distress and burst into tears, Remus immediately pulling her into his arms.

Ron was curious. "So how did you get away?"

"I broke his jaw."

"You did what?" Sirius asked in shock.

"Broke his jaw," Remus repeated as he gently rubbed Hermione's back. "I'd lost my wands and it was the last avenue open to me. Unfortunately Harry then disappeared so I have no idea where he is now."

"We can't just leave him roving around out there," Lucy said. "Who knows what he might do to someone if they come across him."

"I'm going to find him," Remus decided. "If I don't, he'll go over the edge and we'll lose him forever. And before you ask, Hermione, I'm going alone." After kissing Hermione on the forehead and handing her over to Luna, he picked up his Unspeakable's cloak. "I'll let you know if I find anything out."

Pansy stopped him from leaving by grabbing his arm. "You can't go looking for Harry, at least you can, but only until Sunday night. After that you're going to have to continue to take Harry's place at Hogwarts if we want to keep up the charade."

Remus knew they had to put their charade first before Harry. "Then I'll be back by Sunday night."

Luna brought up a good point. "You've obviously managed to avoid running into Greyback so far but if you do this on a more permanent basis, he's going to find out what you are."

Pansy immediately told her differently. "Greyback's been reassigned to the US. Tom decided that schoolgirls were far too much of a temptation for him. Hagrid will be taking his place as Tom's chief executioner but he's kept outside in a cage on a permanent basis."

"And you were going to tell us this when?" Sirius asked.

"I told Harry last week," Pansy said in her defense. "He didn't tell you, did he?"

"No. He simply told me that Greyback was gone, not about Hagrid," Remus said in exasperation. "It doesn't matter anyway at the moment. Harry is my priority, not Greyback or Hagrid." He then vanished.

Once Remus had gone, Sirius ignored what Remus had said and decided to go looking for Harry as well. "If Harry's injured, he may well have gone to the hospital. I know a few people I can check in with, so I'll begin there." He then disappeared.

Patrick also offered to leave and look, vanishing right behind Sirius. Lucy promptly forbade anybody else to leave, asking Macclesby to change the wards to ensure they didn't.

St. Bart's

As soon as he arrived at St. Bart's, Sirius headed for the emergency section and sought out Charity Levi, his former colleague. "Charity, I know I don't work here anymore but have you had someone in with a broken jaw? It's an emergency."

Since she owed Sirius a favor, Charity glanced around her before saying, "Yes, he's in room 2. I was about to deal with him."

"He's a friend," Sirius said quickly. "And he was fighting when he shouldn't have been if you know what I mean. Do you mind if I deal with him and take him home?"

"Of course not," Charity said before she also passed on some more information to him. "Before you go in, we had a young woman admitted a few days ago and she matches the description of your missing girl. Unfortunately I didn't know how to contact you."

Sirius halted in his tracks. "She was only admitted a few days ago?"

"Apparently she's been in a coma in a Muggle hospital in Dundee since the attack, but she began doing strange things a few days ago, so I got to hear about it, and she was tested by our liaison officer and found to be magical," Charity explained. "Do you want to see her?"

"Later," Sirius said, just like Remus his first concern being Harry. "I want to see if my friend is okay first."

"Then let's go check on him and next time don't leave it so long before you drop by," Charity warned as she followed Sirius into the room. "Nicola, I can take it from here."

The nurse left and Sirius pulled out his wand before turning it on Charity. "I hate to do this when you've been so helpful. Stupefy."

Sirius lowered her onto a chair before saying to Harry, "I'll obliviate her in a minute." He then put up a privacy spell. "You're lucky that your face is such a mess and that I got here in time. Otherwise I have no doubt someone would have recognized you."

Harry let out a hissing sigh of relief and some hisses of pain as Sirius cast several healing spells and Harry's jaw realigned itself. Sirius then passed Harry a painkilling potion. "Don't speak and sip this. I'm going to get you out of here."

After dealing with Charity, Sirius then grabbed Harry's arm and bypassed the hospital wards, thankful his magical signature had apparently not been eradicated from them, before apparating them to Justin's flat, presuming quite correctly that no-one would interrupt them there.

He then pointed in the direction of the only bedroom. "Take out your cufflinks, head for the bedroom and take that sedative. I'll need to cast a final spell on your jaw in the morning. And don't even think about not taking the sedative; you'll be in agony during the night if you don't because I won't be giving you another painkilling potion, and if you try to leave I promise I won't be attempting to help you again."

Still in a good deal of pain, Harry stalked off, the sedative in his hand.

After checking on a sleeping Harry a short time later, Sirius left a painkilling potion by his bed before he warded the flat and left.

Potter Place

Hermione stood up when Sirius apparated in. "Any luck?"

"Not finding Harry, no," Sirius lied. "But Charity Levi, a former colleague thinks she might have found Parvati."

Ron shot to his feet. "Really?"

"Yes, but she's in a coma. However, I'll take you to see her if you want to go now," Sirius offered.

Ron did, and, after Macclesby dropped the wards to allow Ron egress, together Ron and Sirius headed off to the hospital.

It was midnight when Patrick returned. "I'm sorry but I can't find him."

Hermione thanked him. "I appreciate what you've done."

"I'll continue to keep a watch," Patrick promised before he kissed Pansy on the cheek. "I have to go home. I don't want your mother returning and I'm not there."

"Goodnight, Dad," Pansy said before making a suggestion to Hermione. "Do you want me to stay here as well?"

Hermione shook her head. "You'd better go back to Hogwarts, just in case."

After hugging her friend, Pansy was allowed to leave through the wards by Macclesby. Lucy then made the decision that it was time they all went to bed.

"But..."

"Hermione, sitting up and fretting won't bring Harry home any quicker," Lucy said firmly. "Now bed."

Soon the house was quiet, although sleep was far from most of their minds.

The Next Evening

Harry was like a caged bear by the time Sirius came to release him. He had no idea that he had slept through Sirius' morning visit, although he had been relieved to find a painkilling potion sitting on the bedside table. "Why have you locked me up here?"

"Because you're a liability, Harry," Sirius said, running his wand over Harry. "I see your jaw has healed nicely although you'll have some nasty bruising for a few days."

"That's because that bastard packs quite a punch," Harry said angrily.

"You did try to kill him," Sirius reminded him. "And quite unjustly I might add."

"They were going to kill me and run off together – how is it unjust that I got in first?"

Sirius was far from surprised that Harry believed this. "Harry, over the next few days you're going to believe the world is after you, just like you believed that Remus and Hermione were scheming against you. They weren't. They both love you and were afraid for you and so they tried to help you." Sirius could see Harry didn't believe him. "Fine, believe they're involved if you want to right now, but in a few days' time you're going to realize that you were wrong about things and they were simply trying to help."

"But you're not helping me," Harry pointed out.

Sirius laughed, but it wasn't unkind. "Actually I am but I'm not going to do what everyone else would and force withdrawal on you. Instead I want to help you make up your mind what it is you want. If you tell me that you want help then I'll take you home to Potter Place and I'll ask Remus to put you through withdrawal yet again."

"And if I don't want that?" Harry asked, having disliked the feeling immensely.

"Then I think you're going to need to put some space between you and everyone you care about," Sirius said. "Because if you don't, the paranoia I know you're going to experience will drive you to do something you'll regret again."

"I don't regret trying to kill that bastard," Harry said angrily, still believing in his heart of hearts that Remus and Hermione were having an affair. "And I'm not going to regret tracking him down and finishing what I started."

"Trust me when I say you're going to regret it if you do something that stupid."

"Killing the man who stole my girlfriend isn't stupid."

"It is when you're wrong. Believe me, I know that only too well from experience."

"Did you kill someone?"

"No," Sirius responded. "But I broke my girlfriend's heart by doing as you did last night, although I only accused her of not loving me, not of having an affair. My father thankfully realized what was happening and stepped in to help me before I did do something stupid that I'd regret, just as I'm doing with you. The only difference is that he didn't offer me the alternative of going through withdrawal, something that won't be available to you if you truly become one with the Dark Arts. Once they become part of you, Harry, nothing you do or say will take it away. Believe me, I know."

Harry casually walked over to the drinks cabinet and helped himself to a Scotch, not offering one to Sirius, something he would never have done normally, proof that he wasn't himself. "So, if I say yes, I want to go ahead with this, what if I turn into another Snape?"

"I don't think you will," Sirius said, taking the glass of Scotch out of Harry's hand. "Get yourself another one." As Harry angrily did so, Sirius explained. "Snape was always a strange, twisted kid and that's why the Dark Arts distorted his character. On the other hand, I wasn't, and I initially loathed the Dark Arts, just as you did. I honestly think if you pursue them, then you'll become like me."

"And if I don't?" Harry asked.

"Then despite my offer to help you, I'll do whatever is necessary to take you down if it becomes necessary," Sirius said bluntly. "And we both know I can do it."

Harry hated that Sirius was correct but he still tried to prove otherwise. "I thought that bastard would be no problem and look at what happened to me."

"That's because you weren't thinking straight," Sirius said, pointing to a chair. "Sit down."

Harry hesitated for a moment and then he did as Sirius asked. "Now what?"

"I know the only reason you're not attacking me right now is because you need someone to talk to," Sirius said, "someone who understands what you're going through."

His hand shaking, Harry took a slug of his Scotch and admitted the truth. "The need to use the Dark Arts eats at me, Sirius. I try and stop and then it's like a craving that won't go away. I need it more than I've ever needed anything, even my cheating bitch of a girlfriend, and I don't think I can face losing it."

Sirius decided to ignore Harry's nasty comment about Hermione and asked, "So what do you want to do?"

Harry took a slug of his Scotch before giving Sirius his answer.

Potter Place – five days later

Hermione flopped down onto her seat as she returned from her latest search. "We've searched everywhere. He's nowhere to be found."

"I came up empty as well," Ron said. "It's as if he's fell off the face of the earth."

"It's too late now, though isn't it?" Hermione asked softly. "He'll have gone over the edge."

"I'm afraid so," Remus said, dropping onto the sofa and taking the Scotch that Macclesby had brought him without asking. "I'm sorry, Hermione. This is entirely my fault. I shouldn't have pushed him so hard."

"I was as much to blame as I agreed we should do it," Hermione said, not willing to let Remus take the blame on his shoulders for what Harry had done. "But it still doesn't help us."

"Harry won't be found until he wants to be," Pansy said. "And right now it looks as though he doesn't want to be found."

1st December 1998

Anna Jameson, who now lived with her fellow Aurors in a safe house, dropped by Remus' home to find everyone there with rather long faces. She therefore decided to try to take everyone's mind off Harry. "I think I have a lead on Bill Weasley."

This announcement caught Ron's attention. "Really? You've found my brother?"

"I said I have a lead," Anna repeated. "One of the Aurors in the safe house I'm staying in knows someone, who knows someone, if you know what I mean."

When everyone nodded, she continued. "Anyway, there was a sighting of your brother, or at least someone who looks like him, in Bath."

"Bath?" Ron asked in surprised. "What would Bill be doing in Bath?"

"The same as us – hiding out," Anna said. "So we're going to keep an eye-out over the next few days for him. In the meantime, I wanted to talk to you all about our housing situation."

"It's rather crowded I expect," Hermione said.

"Probably no worse than your own," Anna responded, aware that Luna was bunking in with Lucy's daughters, while Ron and Neville were doing the same with Julian. Justin and Sirius were utilizing the sitting room and Hermione by default, when she wasn't staying at Hogwarts, was in with Lucy. "But it's not the lack of living room that's an issue, it's the lack of a cohesive space for us to meet in."

"So you need to find somewhere to take the place of Auror Division?" Hermione asked.

Anna nodded. "We do."

"What about a Muggle hotel meeting room?" Justin suggested.

"It's too expensive and no, you're not paying for it out of your trust fund," Anna said firmly. "We need somewhere we can organize a working division from, somewhere permanent."

"My homes are completely unusable," Sirius said, having decided that until he had access to his funds at Gringotts both homes would have to remain in the condition they were. "And we can't access the Potter Estate and Remus is refusing to let anyone return to Potter Place."

"Then we need somewhere else, preferably somewhere we can live and work under one roof," Anna declared. "Does anyone have any other suggestions?"

After a few moments, Hermione came up with something. "What about caravans? I know you lot use tents but caravans are better protected against bad weather and you could find somewhere to place them in one spot."

Ron looked blankly at Hermione. "Caravans?"

Hermione explained, "A type of portable home. They can either be pulled or they remain static, and usually the static ones are bigger."

Our problem though is deciding, if we go ahead with that sort of housing, how many we're going to need."

"How many do they sleep?" Anna asked, intrigued by Hermione's idea.

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know, I think they vary."

"Then let's say if we end up with fifty people, or we can look ahead and say two hundred as we don't know how many others we'll pick up along the way," Anna said, thinking over the problem in her mind, "and we put four in each caravan, then we'd need fifty."

"I have no idea where we'd get fifty caravans from," Hermione said as she thought it over, before picking up a quill and parchment to make notes. "We could steal them from a Muggle campsite but that would likely make the Muggle news and I don't doubt that it would come to Tom's attention."

Ron, on the other hand, thought it a great idea. "It doesn't matter if it does or not, if we can erect a Fidelius, he'd never know where we were."

Neville waited until Hermione had finished writing down what they had thought of so far. "Do all Muggles have caravans?"

Hermione smiled and shook her head. "No. They rent them, usually from a brochure where they pick out what campsite they want to stay at."

"Can we get a brochure?" Ron asked, wanting to see what a caravan looked like.

Hermione nodded. "We would just need to go to a travel agent and pick some up."

"Then let's do that now." Anna grabbed Hermione's hand and apparated them into Telford, one of the areas they had now taken to visiting if they wanted to get out as it was not a major city.

Hermione scowled. "I hate disappearing without warning."

"Sorry," Anna said as she looked around. "Which way?"

Hermione led the way up the alley and into the main shopping area before locating a store. "In here."

Anna had never really used a Muggle travel agency before and ended up coming out with a lot of brochures. "I really shouldn't have allowed myself to get distracted but there are so many different types of holiday homes to choose from."

Hermione tugged her back towards the alley. "Shrink them and let's go."

Once back at Remus' home, Anna thumbed through the self-catering brochures. "Instead of caravans, why don't we just take over a whole campsite like this one? It has proper buildings in it that we could use as a HQ, a canteen and even a make-shift hospital."

Hermione looked at the brochure that was displaying holiday homes in an up-market area of Dorset. "How do you propose we take over that?"

"I could buy it," Anna admitted.

Everyone looked at her in surprise. "But you just vetoed Justin's idea about renting space at a hotel."

"Because it's money for nothing," Anna said.

"How can you afford to buy a camp site?" Ron asked.

"My father is Mack Jameson of Jameson Industries, although we have something of a strained relationship to be honest. He didn't support my joining Auror Division and so I told him I didn't need his money and I'd do this on my own. I swore never to speak to him again."

"Does he know you're safe?" Hermione asked, wondering how tumultuous Anna's relationship with her father was.

"I'm not that callous," Anna said, having despatched a note when she had first left Belvedere House. "But I don't want anything to do with him, although it seems silly when we need money so badly."

"I completely understand the whole parent thing," Sirius said in sympathy, not prying too deeply. "And if you want to find another way, then that's what we'll do."

"I would rather do that to be truthful." Anna didn't want to tell those gathered that she and her father had fallen out over her elder sister.

"Then I have an idea," Justin said. "I know it would exhaust him for a few days but because he's the strongest magically now, Uncle Sirius could erect wards and a Fidelius around the campsite after we go in and extract whoever is staying there. If we obliviate everybody and send them home, they'll never know what happened."

"Justin, in case you've forgotten, it's coming up to the main Christmas holiday season and the Muggles staying there would have children. We can't obliviate really young children," Hermione pointed out.

Sirius also provided a stumbling block. "And to be honest, even though I am powerful, a place that size would be nigh on impossible to place under the Fidelius and to ward. We'll have to come up with something else."

He was going to be proved wrong when two weeks later, Anna's lead hit gold.

Bath

Bill smiled politely at the six young women who had surrounded him at the bar. "Ladies, why do I get the feeling you're not here to buy me a drink?"

"Because we're here to escort you to see your brother," Anna said. "I'm Commander Jameson of BritAD."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I know you're not a Muggle and we're not Death Eaters," Anna responded as two of her fellow Aurors withdrew their wands.

"Okay, so I'm not a Muggle, but you're far too young to be heading BritAD," Bill said, eyeing the Aurors warily.

"As far as I knew when I took over this position everybody who ranked above me was dead," Anna said in explanation. "And since I've held this position for more than 90 days and it was agreed to by Ignotus..."

"Ignotus colluding with the head of BritAD?" Bill laughed. "You have to be kidding."

"I'm not," Anna said in an annoyed voice. "Desperate times call for desperate measures, and so yes, we are in collusion. I can provide you with an oath if you need one."

Bill's smile faded somewhat as he began to realize that perhaps this young woman was being serious. "I would." After directing the Muggle bartender to another part of the bar, Anna did exactly that, and Bill asked, "How bad is it?"

"We have thirty-four Aurors that we know of that are alive," Anna said, motioning to her entourage to go sit down. Taking a seat next to Bill, she accepted his offer of a drink and decided to have a white wine. "Obviously some are, or were, more senior than me, but although I offered to step down, nobody else wants this position, and to be honest I know Ignotus well now, so it was agreed I should remain in charge."

"So do you know who Ignotus is?"

Anna nodded. "Yes, but we've decided that although he has revealed himself to me, he's going to be resuming his cloak of anonymity now that the situation is changing."

"Changing how?"

"We're recruiting new trainee Aurors, slowly but surely," Anna said. "One of whom led me to you."

"Who?"

"Edwina Jericho," Anna told him. "She said she met you in here."

"I didn't realize she was a witch," Bill said, annoyed at having slipped up but glad to have made contact with a friendly face.

"She's a Muggle-born and so knows how to hide the fact," Anna said, before getting down to business. "Your brother, Ron, has been very worried about you."

"And the rest of my family?"

Anna slowly shook her head. "I'm so sorry."

Bill turned to the bartender. "Can I get a triple whiskey?" After knocking it back, he shakily asked, "How?"

"I don't think this is the right place to talk," Anna decided before holding out her hand. "I can take you to Ron."

Bill took Anna's hand and they walked out of the pub before vanishing.

20th December 1998

After giving Bill some time to get over his initial shock about his family, Harry, and meeting Sirius Black, Anna and Sirius had explained about their need for a permanent location and Bill had confirmed he thought he could pull off warding the campsite but that he'd need Sirius' help to cast the Fidelius. And so, they decided upon the very campsite Anna had picked and chose a date a few days before Christmas to carry out their plan.

Standing in the cold night just outside of the campsite, Sirius thought the team he was leading looked rather fetching. "Do you think the Muggles would have all women police?"

"They called policewomen, not that it matters," Edwina said. "Everyone will be too busy trying to leave than to take notice of a lack of policemen, well except for you, of course."

Sirius grinned at his own reflection in the mirror he had conjured up. "If I say so I look rather good as a policeman."

Edwina, who had a bit of a crush on Sirius, winked at him. "Perhaps you should keep it."

Anna scowled at Edwina. "Save it until a more suitable time, Jericho. You too, Black." As Edwina apologized, something Sirius didn't,

Anna turned to those assembled. "Does everyone know what they're doing?"

As they acknowledged they did, Remus enlarged the fire truck he had stolen the night before, and Sirius enlarged several police cars - both were going to be driven by magic as Sirius had no idea how to drive a car, although Remus would be driving the fire truck. "Let's get ready to roll."

Inside the holiday complex, Neville started a fire that he and several others of the team with him were going to control. Then he set off the fire alarms. "Let's make sure we don't let this get out of hand. Hermione will kill us if we do."

Dressed in employee uniforms, Hermione and Pansy, together with a barrage of Aurors, began to rouse holidaymakers, asking them to pack as quickly as possible and to vacate the premises, explaining that they had about ten minutes to get out, something they both knew wouldn't occur normally but as Edwina had pointed out, the Muggles were more interested in trying to leave rather than thinking about the surrounding circumstances.

As she knocked on another door, Hermione could see flames leaping into the sky from the entertainment building that Neville had set on fire. "I hope he gets that under control." She turned as a fire engine rolled in, and she knew it would be Remus' engine, as Aurors were positioned to stop any emergency services from getting through, obliterating them and sending them away.

As she left the apartment block a short time later, she was surprised to see Neville strolling up to her. "I thought you were in charge of the fire."

"I've left Emily dealing with it," Neville said, watching the Muggle cars driving away. "How many left to go?"

"Four families that don't drive. The first two buses have left and we're just waiting on these four."

A bus suddenly trundled past, the families' faces plastered against the window as they looked out. "They've all been told that the campsite will be closed down and we'll recompense them,"

Hermione added. "Once the Fidelius is in place they'll forget it even exists."

"Run a final sweep so that I can start; I don't want anybody around while I set up these wards," Bill demanded as Emily came over, the fire now being put out by magic rather than the fire truck.

"We've done it," Emily confirmed. "You are free to start."

Bill apparated to the boundary of the holiday camp and he began to erect wards, lights dancing from his wand as he began to layer them one by one. It took him almost six hours to do what he needed to until finally, with Sirius' help, he set up the Fidelius, making Sirius the secret keeper. Then he sank to the ground, Hermione running over now that she was allowed to do so while Sirius made a blanket announcement to all those there of the name of the campsite and where it was located.

"Are you okay?"

Bill shook his head. "Not really. I feel as though that fire truck has run over me."

"At least we could put some of your skills to some good use," Hermione said as she sat down beside Bill, the dawn beginning to break as she did. "We couldn't have done it without you as we didn't have any curse-breakers left alive from BritAD."

"I could have done with their help if there had been," Bill said, flopping back onto the grass verge and closing his eyes.

Anna came over a few moments later just as Bill began snoring. "I think he's exhausted."

Hermione looked behind her as the sun began to rise. "I just hope this was worth it, and that we actually manage to recruit more people."

"We will," Anna said and then turned away to head back to help those who were starting to deal with sorting out the accommodation, Lucy and Julian having been placed in charge.

But everything they had achieved was about to be put in jeopardy.

29th December 1999

Remus almost stopped dead with shock when he entered the sitting room of Tom's home to discover Tom and what was obviously the Inner Circle all sitting or standing around, although none of them were wearing masks. "My Lord."

"I can see you didn't expect to see me, Gareth," Tom said, smiling with his arm around a familiar woman, who was obviously pregnant. "This is my wife, Cho Mortimer."

Again he was surprised, but Remus quickly recovered and, well aware that he was not supposed to know the Chinese young woman, he bowed slightly. "Mrs. Mortimer, a pleasure."

Cho shook Remus' hand. "I've heard a lot about you, Gareth." She gave Pansy, a perfunctory glance, her voice aloof as she greeted Pansy. "Miss Parkinson."

"Mrs. Mortimer," Pansy said, not bothering to keep the hostility out of her voice. She had never liked the girl when she had been at Hogwarts and she still didn't.

Sirius appeared a short time later, a woman at his side. He left her to greet Cho with a kiss on the cheek. "I see you're feeling better, Cho."

"I am, thank you, Simon," Cho said, smiling back at Sirius. "I don't know what I'd have done without you."

"It's all part of the service," Sirius said, before he shook hands with Tom and then Remus, who he knew would have a great deal of questions later. "Gareth, I didn't expect to see you here."

"Likewise," Remus said, determining that Sirius was telling the truth. "I'm afraid I haven't met your dinner partner before."

"This is Cammie Sebastian," Sirius said, drawing the redhead close to him.

"Gareth, Simon, Cammie, let me introduce you to everyone," Genevieve said, taking up her role as hostess.

One by one each of them politely shook hands with the men and their partners: Lucius had left Narcissa at home, although this was hardly a surprise, since Remus knew that she was pregnant again. Instead Lucius had brought along his latest mistress, Pansy's older sister, Petra, a match Genevieve didn't entirely approve of but Petra had shut her mother down when Genevieve complained.

As Remus moved on, he nodded politely to Severus Snape, doing his best to keep his feelings in check and deal with him politely. "Severus, it's nice to see you outside of Hogwarts."

"Likewise, Gareth," Severus said in a friendly voice. He was less than friendly towards Sirius. "Blackwell."

Sirius nodded his head, not bothering to offer his hand. "Snape."

Severus then turned to the tall, slim, blonde woman at his side. "This is Christabelle Carter, a friend."

Remus wondered what had induced such an attractive woman to team up with Severus, but he knew that being a part of the Inner Circle had its perks. "Miss Carter." He guessed that she had had to have been the woman who had accompanied Severus to Pansy's engagement dinner, as Pansy nodded her head and greeted Christabelle by her first name.

The final person was the one that Remus found the hardest to deal with, his former partner, and he noted that Tom seemed rather taken with him, making the introduction as he put his arm around the older man's shoulders. "Gareth, this is Dae Venant, and he's one of my crowning jewels. It's thanks to him that I was able to take down the Ministry's alpha and beta sites."

"And you helped with trying to discover the American sites as well, if I remember correctly," Remus said, letting Dae know that he was aware of who he was.

"That's right," Dae said, shaking hands with Remus. "That's rather a firm grip you have."

Remus smiled as he released Dae's hand. "I like to think you can tell a lot from how a man shakes your hand."

"So what would you say about mine?" Dae asked, as he led Remus over to where drinks were being served by a house-elf.

"That you're the sort of man who knows what he wants and goes for it," Remus said.

"A fair assessment," Dae said. "What's your poison?"

"Red wine," Remus said, deciding to stick to a less innocuous alcoholic beverage than hard liquor, even given his metabolism.

As the house-elf passed over rather a large glass of wine, both men turned as Genevieve announced dinner was served.

For Remus time seemed to stand still as the dinner dragged on, although the conversation was both lively and interesting. He wanted nothing more than to be away from Severus, who was seated opposite him with Daphne Greengrass, who was smiling brightly at everything Dae Venant said. Remus thought she was insipid to say the least but given that she was seated with an Inner Circle member, he also knew not to underestimate her.

Finally dinner was over, and Remus hoped he could escape early with Pansy. That thought was dashed as Tom asked the Inner Circle, Daphne Greengrass, and, surprisingly, Sirius to join him.

Sirius excused himself. "I'll join you in a moment. I'm afraid I need to..."

Genevieve pointed the way down the corridor. "Third door on the left."

Sirius motioned to the door with his eyes and, after the door to the study shut, Remus also excused himself.

Sirius pulled Remus into the bathroom as he reached the room. "Swap places with me."

"What?"

"Just do it!"

Trusting Sirius implicitly, Remus tapped his ring and a mirror of Sirius stood in his place. "We need to talk first."

"No time," Sirius said, pushing Remus out of the bathroom. "Go."

Remus entered the drawing room, apologizing for his absence. "Sorry about that." He then sat down, taking another glass of red wine from a house elf, which then vanished.

Tom was also nursing a glass of red wine and he put it down before saying, "Simon, while I normally would not make you privy to these sorts of conversations, I have done so this time because I'd like for you to join my Inner Circle. And so, before we begin, I'd like an oath from you not to reveal what is about to be discussed, as well as a secondary oath that all of this group have made."

Remus did as he was asked, although he was cursing at his inability to now relay the discussion back.

Tom then began. "As the rest of you all already know, I have a spy who is helping me. Simon, only you won't know that Daphne is not part of the Inner Circle but she is the young lady charged with helping me discover what our little dissidents are up to. And she's here tonight to make her first report to me."

All eyes turned to Daphne, who immediately launched into her recitation. "So far I've only made contact with a few of them. However, I do know that they're worried about Harry Potter because he's vanished after succumbing to the Dark Arts."

Remus choked on his wine, unable to hide his shock that Daphne somehow knew about Harry.

He wasn't the only one to show his astonishment at the comment, Severus sneering and asking, "Potter? I thought he was dead."

"Not unless the dead are walking," Daphne said bluntly, her earlier lack of character having long vanished to be replaced by a confident young woman who seemed to be taking pleasure from her current assignment. "It's definitely Potter – apparently he has some sort of cufflinks that expunge poison."

"So he escaped his fate, but fell prey to a different one," Tom said, a smile crossing his face. "Perhaps there's more than one way to skin a cat. I want a look-out set up for Potter and if he's found, then bring him to me. Don't kill him – I may have another use for him." He then smiled at Daphne. "Please continue."

She then moved on, outlining that what she knew. As he listened to Daphne make her report, Remus suspected that Daphne had infiltrated Belvedere House and had been masquerading as one of the women who Anna had taken into her confidence, women who now had free access to his home as well as the campsite they had set up.

Tom nodded, his smile evidence that he was pleased by Daphne's progress. "You've done well, Daphne. Keep trying to find out as much as you can. You will report back in one week's time or if you have news of import that cannot wait."

"Yes, my Lord," Daphne said.

"Simon, I'll inform you when you're needed again," Tom said, effectively dismissing both Remus and Daphne. "Good evening."

Remus nodded his head and left, his mind awl. Entering the sitting room again with Daphne, he made his way over to Pansy, who was deep in conversation with Christabelle. "I'm going to speak to Patrick."

When the evening came to a very late end, Pansy agreed to accompany Remus back to his home, presuming that he wanted to dissect what had gone on. "That was a nightmare although I do like Christabelle." She raised an eyebrow. "So what did Tom want?"

"I can't say," Remus said, his vow to Tom effectively tying his hands and rendering it impossible to mention that they had a traitor in their midst.

Pansy was more than a little dismayed. "You can't tell me anything?"

Remus shook his head. "Sorry."

"But whatever you discovered is bothering you," Pansy deduced. "Are Harry and I still returning to Hogwarts?"

"I've heard nothing different," Remus said, and he put a stop to what he knew Pansy was doing. "And don't try and get me to drop hints. I can't, Pansy."

"At least we know something is up," Pansy said, just as frustrated as Remus was. She flopped onto the sofa and Macclesby appeared with drinks. "Hello, Macclesby." She took the glass of white wine he had brought her. "I thought I'd had enough to drink but as I know that Tom's told you something you've had to swear an oath to keep is enough to drive me to drink!"

Remus took a glass of red wine and tapped the glass so that it would keep refilling until he cancelled the spell.

Sirius chose that moment to apparate in. "I thought I'd better give it a few minutes before I left as well." He then tapped his ring, reverting to his usual appearance, something Remus had failed to do. "You might want to change, Remus."

Pansy was now confused as Remus tapped his ring. "What's going on?"

"That's what I want to know," Remus said, before he turned to Sirius. "Why ask me to swap places with you?"

"Because I suspected that Tom was going to ask me to join the Inner Circle, although I know you won't be able to confirm whether that happened or not, and I didn't want to be bound by an oath to keep his secrets," Sirius said in explanation.

Remus was impressed by Sirius' quick thinking but he still had questions for him. "Why didn't you mention Chang before and the fact that Tom had changed his last name?"

"I couldn't," Sirius said, aware that his answer would need no expansion. "So what happened in there?"

"I can't tell you," Remus said in annoyance.

"Which is why I wanted to do the swap, so if I am now a member of the Inner Circle, I can relay back what's being said," Sirius said, before he dropped down beside Pansy on the couch. "And speaking

of relaying back things, you've never mentioned Christabelle before."

"And you've never mentioned Cammie," Pansy countered.

"I met her a while back when I treated her for burns during a show duel," Sirius said. "Your turn."

"I know Christabelle from my engagement party. She accompanied Snape then but I didn't mention her specifically as there were a lot of people there," Pansy said, before going on. "She told me tonight that she's a Ministry employee, although she never exactly said what department she heads."

"I seriously don't know what she's sees in a piece of shit like Snape."

"She must see something," Pansy remarked, closing her eyes as she leant back against the sofa. "And I think she's worth trying to find something out about. I'll ask Dad about her when I next get him alone."

Remus agreed with her, and then casually asked about Daphne. "What did you think about Greengrass?"

"She's always been a slut and on the look-out for the next best thing," Pansy said, her loathing of the young woman reflected in her voice. "I was surprised, however, to see her with Venant and that she was invited to that meeting."

"As was I," Sirius said, running a hand over his chin. "Venant is definitely well in with Tom."

Pansy shook his head. "I still don't know how he managed to fool Remus for so long."

Remus suspected that Dae had been using emotional dampening potion, and he told Pansy what he suspected. "Either way, he made me feel like a fool for trusting him."

"It wasn't your fault. You thought he was your friend and so you trusted him," Pansy said, reaching over to take Remus' hand. "Just as we all trust each other."

Remus now knew differently after finding out about Daphne, but he plastered a smile on his face to hide his fears. "So we do."

Pansy failed to notice Remus was being far from honest and brought up Cho. "Just like you, I was surprised to learn that Tom had gotten married, although given that Cho is pregnant with his child, I'm not surprised. I noticed Mother did little to make Cho feel welcome."

"That's because I'm sure we were right about Genevieve sleeping with Tom and his marrying Cho, who is giving Tom what he wants, has upset the applecart," Sirius said, having been unable to miss the hatred that Genevieve patently had felt for Cho.

"It's nice to see my mother being thwarted," Pansy admitted. "Usually she gets her own way in everything." She shook herself and stood up. "I think I'd better stop there. You don't want to listen to me ranting about what a bitch my mother is."

"I'd probably agree with everything you said," Remus said, and he too got to his feet. "Would you like to stay over? I'm sure Macclesby will have gotten the guest suite ready."

Having drunk a fair bit that night, Pansy nodded. "I think I would." She then leant over and kissed Sirius on the cheek, before standing on tip-toe and doing the same to Remus. "Goodnight, both."

Now that Lucy and her children and everyone else were living at the campsite, Remus had his home back and Sirius decided that he too would take advantage of Remus' hospitality and, after bidding his friend goodnight, he headed to bed.

Remus, however, didn't follow, instead sitting back down and trying to figure out how the heck he was going to be able to warn everyone what was happening without killing himself or endangering them. At that moment he knew that his only real option was to kill whoever Daphne was impersonating, although he had no idea as yet who it might be.

The Next Morning

Hermione and the others were waiting in the dining room for Pansy when she arrived back at Seashore, the name of campsite, although Parvati and Ron were absent, having gone away for a weekend

together to celebrate Parvati's recovery. "Come and tell us how your nightmare dinner went. We need a bit of gossip."

Pansy followed everyone into Hermione's holiday home, Hermione closing the door behind her. She knew that no-one was expecting what she was about to tell them.

Luna looked expectantly at Pansy when the dark-haired girl didn't immediately begin talking. "So, how did it go?"

"I was a little shocked to discover that the entire Inner Circle was there and they were unmasked," Pansy revealed.

Justin whistled. "Was it a social visit or more?"

"More, I think. Sirius was invited to a meeting with Tom and the Inner Circle but he swapped places with Remus..."

Neville asked, "Why?"

So Pansy explained Sirius' reasoning. "Even so, Remus couldn't tell us anything about the meeting. He couldn't even hint, which means it had to be something big."

Sirius was the next person to walk in, and between them, he and Pansy then told them about the attendees, Cho being married to Tom and her pregnancy, and what little else they had found out. Then Pansy yawned. "Sorry, but it was late before things broke up."

"That must be why Remus is still in bed," Sirius said.

"Probably, but I know he didn't go to bed until late," Pansy said. "When I got up, Macclesby said he was up until six this morning."

Sirius frowned, not having spoken to Macclesby. "Something really big must have gone on behind those closed doors. I know from seeing him pacing the floors at Hogwarts that Remus can never sleep when he's really worried."

"He didn't give you any hints?" Hermione asked in frustration.

Pansy shook her head. "He said he couldn't. To be honest I think he might have been inducted into the Inner Circle, as Sirius suspected

might happen. If he has, then to be honest he'll be a danger to us." She gave a wry smile. "Something I should have mentioned last night."

Sirius disagreed. "I don't see why. He's not going to be attending any of their meetings in future, I will."

"I know that but if he is a member of the Inner Circle, I know from my mother that the vows they make are far more reaching than those given by a normal Death Eater: He'll have been charged with telling Tom anything that might be of use to him, which would normally include betraying us but obviously his initial vow to keep everything we do a secret should hopefully have overridden that."

"Thank Merlin for small mercies," Neville said, his voice glum. "But we're going to have to watch ourselves around him if what you say is true."

Pansy nodded just as Remus walked into the holiday home. "Morning."

Remus knew something was up as he noticed Sirius' cagey look. "What did I do now?"

"Pansy told us what happened last night and that you can't be trusted," Hermione said, thinking that Remus looked troubled.

"And that at some point I might need to paint a wall red," Remus said, well aware that they would understand what he meant without his spelling it out.

Hermione smiled apologetically at the man who had become her sounding board since Harry's disappearance. "Remus, I'm sorry but anything we discuss in future will no longer be available to you. We can't take that chance."

In response, Remus pulled out his wand. "I, Remus John Lupin, swear on my life and magic that I have not revealed anything about any situation, house or person to Tom or any of his men, nor will I ever do so, not even if it means losing my life."

"I'm sorry you had to do that."

"I'm just glad that oaths exist." Remus rubbed his hand over his face.

"Something serious is bothering you, isn't it?" Hermione asked, recognizing the gesture.

"Yes, but I can't tell you what it is," Remus said regretfully. "I just wish to Merlin I could. If you'll excuse me I need some fresh air." He then left, Hermione following behind him.

Luna gave Sirius a contemplative look. "Is there something going on between them?"

"No," Sirius said, although he had to admit that the two had grown quite close. "They're just providing each other support until we find Harry."

"Do you really think we'll find him?" Pansy asked.

"One can only hope so," Sirius said and, feeling a little guilty, he got to his feet. "I'll see you all later."

Next Chapter: Harry resurfaces; an attack is led on Azkaban.

Chapter 67: A Nasty Surprise

December 31st 1999

After Christmas passed with no sign of Harry returning, everyone decided that they had to start making plans without him. And, with Bill in their midst, it had been decided that they now stood a chance of bringing down the wards that surrounded Azkaban prison itself and that they should try to rescue those still imprisoned there and then destroy the prison.

Therefore, instead of celebrating, on New Year's Eve, Remus found himself sneaking around Hogwarts on a mission to obtain the rope portkey they needed to get to Azkaban.

Thankfully nothing went wrong, and when Remus eventually returned to Seashore, Sirius was waiting, and, just like Remus, he was wearing his Unspeakable's cloak, his hood up. "Did you get it?"

Remus nodded. "Yes."

Upon hearing this, Anna immediately began to bark out orders, continuing to do so until everyone had confirmed that they knew what they had to do. "It's time to go."

The moment the group vanished, Julian turned to Luna, who was not a good dueler and had been volunteered to remain behind to co-ordinate any incoming injuries with him. "So what are we supposed to do?"

"Wait," Luna said in a dismal voice. "Just wait."

Azkaban Island

The docks were in darkness as the group appeared, wands drawn, but no-one was there to greet them.

Anna nodded towards the boat that was bobbing away next to the quayside. "Jericho, take your team and get that boat ready for arrivals. If things go awry, then just leave and portkey out once you're clear of the wards."

She then turned to Hermione. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Hermione said, her nerves almost overwhelming her.

Anna could see how frightened Hermione was by the dim light coming from the end of her wand. "Don't forget that Noir will track you from the ground, so if the wards don't accept you he'll be able to cushion your landing."

"I know," Hermione said, before changing.

Sirius did the same, his black dog Animagus form allowing him to blend into the shadows. The two of them then left at the same time, Hermione taking to the air but keeping low to the ground, and Sirius loping along at a run that kept him up with her.

When they returned almost at the same time and transformed, Sirius' face was grim although none could see it hidden behind his hood. "There's about forty Death Eaters down there as well as Tom and two of the Inner Circle."

An extremely distressed Hermione had even worse news, having accessed the wards without a problem, the ring she had around her ankle as an owl granting her access. "I flew inside of the prison. Everyone's dead or they might as well be - the place is swarming with Dementors. I almost didn't make it out when one came at me."

At that moment both Bill and Ron were glad that their parents and brother had been already been executed rather than being left to face a terrible fate as having their souls sucked out by a Dementor.

Justin put into words what everyone else was thinking. "Someone betrayed us. So what are we going to do now?"

"Abort," Sirius said. "If they're expecting us, then it would be suicide to try anything."

"Can we get close enough to bring down Azkaban itself?" Anna asked.

Sirius shook his head. "Not if we don't want to kill ourselves, we can't."

"Then we do as Sirius suggested," Anna said. "Let's head for the boat."

When they arrived at the boat they were met by a surprising sight.

Ron ran forward. "Tonks?"

"I was checking out all of the boat, even the bilges, as that's where Sirius said he hid," Neville said as Tonks hugged Ron. "And I discovered she had set up a small hidey-hole down there. And I also..."

"We can talk when we get back," Anna told Neville, stopping his discourse. "Right now, we're leaving."

Hermione stopped her from handing out of the rope. "Wait! If Tom was expecting us, he might have done something to the wards that would kill us if we try to portkey out of here."

Ron disagreed. "He'd have just killed us when we portkeyed in."

Sirius shook his head. "No, he wouldn't. Tom prefers to put on a show - that's why everyone was dead in Azkaban - he was hoping we'd see them before he attacked us."

"But you can't know for certain," Ron said, arguing with Sirius.

Anna interrupted. "It doesn't matter what you both think. To be on the safe side, we should use the boat instead."

"How do we even know the boat is safe?" Sirius asked, before turning to Tonks. "Did you hear anything while you were hiding?"

"Just voices and footsteps."

"I can check it over for anything untoward," Bill said and he began to do exactly that, before saying, "There's a silent ward on it – almost untraceable if you're not looking for it. And even though I know what sort of silent ward it is, I'm not sure what it is meant to do."

Ron snorted. "I sort of get the feeling that it's going to kill us if we use that boat."

Remus agreed. "I imagine that's it booby-trapped to go off either as we cast off or when we reach the wards that surround the Island."

"I'd say probably the latter, and if you're right, I imagine it would create the show Tom hoped for," Bill said.

"Can you bring it down?" Ron asked his brother.

"Yes, but I suspect it's going to make quite the light display when I do," Bill said, although he wasn't entirely sure as although he was familiar with the type of ward, he wasn't with the intricacies of it. "And so we should take the boat out until we get close to the actual wards that surround the island. I'll do it there."

"Can you bring the wards around the Island down?" Remus asked.

"Not without a great deal of time and without creating a similar sort of light display," Bill said. "If we're going to do this, we're going to have to keep the boat as close to the wards that surround the Island as possible."

Remus nodded. "I'll have someone ready with a speed spell to take us through the wards as quickly as possible once you've finished so that we can portkey out using our own portkey. If destroying this ward does create a light show, it will give Tom's men something to hone in on and the fewer we have to deal with, the better."

"Hold on, Bill," Anna said as Bill got up. "Before you do anything, I want an oath that you weren't the one who betrayed us, because given what happened out here today, somebody did and I'm not risking anyone's life by setting sail on this boat or using a portkey you created."

"Anna!" Ron exclaimed.

"It's okay," Bill said, understanding why Anna was questioning his veracity. "I'm the newest person here and one of the few people who knew exactly what was being planned for tonight. Therefore that makes me the most likely to be the one who betrayed you."

Concerned about secrecy, even though Remus couldn't tell anyone about Daphne, he had ensured that the full details of the attack had been restricted to just a few of them until the actual day. And now he

found himself wondering if he had gotten it wrong about Daphne Greengrass and that she wasn't one of the Aurors in Anna's team after all. "I sorry to ask but Commander Jameson is right - we need an oath, Bill."

"Let me do that right now then," Bill responded, very slowly drawing his wand when Anna told him to, her and several other Aurors' wands on him. "I swear on my life and my magic that I hate Tom and what he stands for; that I have never colluded with him nor will I ever collude with him. And most of all I swear that I never betrayed you today."

Anna lowered her wand. "Thank you. You should get to work. Do you need anyone to help?"

"Noir," Bill said, having worked with Sirius on warding Seashore. "He'll need to act as my anchor."

It was a tense few minutes as the boat chugged towards the wards that surrounded the Island.

Everybody jumped when Bill yelled out, "Stop!"

In the cabin, the only Auror who had any familiarity with boats did a full stop before running the engines so that they would maintain their position but not move. She knew that it was up to her not to run into the wards.

Up on deck, Bill began and lights began to glow brightly. "Noir, anchor that yellow light and everyone else get ready – they're going to know exactly where we are now."

He was right and several small pops sounded on deck and Death Eaters, using the lights as beacon, suddenly appeared.

As a full-on battle exploded into action, Sirius and Bill continued their work on the ward, Bill bringing it down a few moments later. "We have to go!"

At the back of the boat, Neville, who was being protected by Edwina Jericho and Justin, aimed his wand into the water. "Properos."

The boat shot forward, all those on it losing their footing. Behind them several more pops sounded as did the splashes the Death Eaters made as they attempted and failed to join their comrades on the boat, which was no longer in the same place as the fading light in the sky.

Remus felt a familiar tingle as they shot through the wards and he smashed the Death Eater closest to him in the face with his fist, this time uncaring that he had just broken someone's jaw. "Grab that rope. You've all got thirty seconds and we're gone." Thirty seconds was not only the time warning but the portkey code word as well.

All there grabbed the rope, including eight Death Eaters, intent on following them.

Remus had asked that the portkey Bill had created would take them to a remote hillside and the moment he landed, Remus took out another Death Eater using the same trick he had on the boat. The Death Eater disappeared.

Next to him, Sirius killed two Death Eaters, easily outclassing them and one by one the others who had made the journey with them fell prey to the same fate, their own actions of trying to take life sealing their doom.

Anna began to survey those with them. "I'm going to do a roll call." By the time it was over, she was dismayed to discover that they were four Aurors short.

Remus put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "It could have been much worse."

"I know," Anna acknowledged. "But it doesn't make it any easier to deal with. Everyone back to Seashore. If you're injured, report to sick bay."

"I'd better head there," Sirius decided, lowering his hood as Anna's team vanished, leaving just the core group behind. "Healer Viking might need a hand."

It had come out that Lucy had dabbled with the idea of becoming a healer before she had become an interior designer and so, with no

need for her current skills, she had begun to pick up on her former vocation, becoming Sirius' assistant.

He arrived back at Seashore and opened up the door to the small ward they had set up there to discover an injured Auror trying to resuscitate Lucy. "Move!"

The Auror moved and, after checking Lucy over, Sirius administered a stabilizing spell before hurrying out of the ward and over to the receiving rooms where he knew Julian and Luna should have been waiting for the inmates who never made it.

They too were in a similar position to Lucy, although Luna had a cut on her arm that was bleeding profusely. And it was patching them up that Remus and Anna found Sirius. "What's happened?"

"Someone's tried to kill them," Sirius barked out as he lifted Luna onto a table. "Lucy was in a similar condition. Whoever betrayed us must have used our absence to do this."

Ron blanched. "Parvati!" He disappeared.

Sirius did the same as he remembered the only other members of the campsite that were defenseless, Remus appearing beside him in the girls' bedroom.

"Who does something like this - they're just kids!"

Remus scooped Sophia up from where she had obviously covered Emsie up with her own body in a bid to protect her little sister. "Tom does. Let's get them to the medical ward."

After checking the two girls out, Sirius let out a slow breath of relief. "It's not good but it's not fatal. Like the others they've been hit with a slow curse that causes severe dehydration and a nasty death. Thankfully it's reversible, although it will be a day or so before they're their usual self."

Ron came dashing into the room. "Parvati's missing."

Neville cursed loudly. "They must have taken her."

Anna put forth a different hypothesis. "Or she did this."

"But she would never have given us up," Ron argued. "They have to have taken her."

"Why take her and leave everyone else to die?" Hermione asked logically. "I'm sorry, Ron, but Anna has to be right."

"No!" Ron said brokenly. "It can't be her. She would never do this."

Remus felt terrible. He couldn't tell anyone the truth: that he had finally worked out that Daphne Greengrass had been masquerading as Parvati and not as one of Anna's team.

It was Sirius who noticed how guilty Remus was looking, although he suspected that Remus had no idea that he was betraying himself at that moment. "You knew we had a spy in our midst, didn't you?"

All those there turned to look at Remus. "I..."

"He can't tell us," Pansy said, finally understanding what must have gone on behind the closed doors at her parents' home. "He must have known that night when we thought he'd been inducted into Tom's Inner Circle in your place, Sirius. That's why he couldn't sleep."

"You know I can't answer that," Remus said, before revealing what he had been about to a moment earlier. "But what I can tell you is that I had no idea that Parvati was a spy."

This made Hermione think. "But if Sirius is right and you are feeling guilty, then you did know we had a spy and couldn't tell us. That's why you limited the details of this mission to just us."

"And why you, like Anna, suspected me," Bill interjected.

"But all along the real spy was Parvati," Sirius said, shaking his head. "What I don't get is why Parvati would have turned on us – unless of course she was fed Imperius Potion while in hospital."

Hermione came up with a different scenario. "Or she wasn't Parvati at all."

Anna was more than a little dismayed to hear this. "But if she wasn't Parvati, then who was she?"

Pansy suddenly gave a yell. "I think I know who it was. On the night that Remus took Sirius' place, Greengrass was there and I couldn't figure out why. I've been so stupid!"

Sirius slapped his own forehead. "So have I."

"We all knew she was there," Hermione said. "You told us but we had no reason to connect her to Parvati until now."

"Oh Merlin!" Ron said, his hand going to his mouth as he went green and bolted for the door. "I've slept with a Slytherin!"

Although their situation was far from humorous, Pansy couldn't help herself and she burst out laughing, apologizing as she did. "Sorry, but it is funny."

The others began to laugh as well, the tension draining from the room as they did. Remus was the first to sober up. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you anything."

"You couldn't have told us even if you had known," Sirius said. "But I imagine you'd have done something about her if you had."

"Killed her," Remus revealed.

"Hold on," Neville said, thinking of a hiccup in their theory as Ron returned, his freckles standing out against his pale face. "Ron was away that weekend you were at the party. How could Greengrass have been Parvati?"

Ron's hopes rose for one moment before he figured it out for himself. "She got me drunk, or I thought she did. One moment I was having a glass of firewhiskey and the next I was waking up the next morning. She told me I passed out."

"She drugged you," Sirius guessed. "And then she left to go to the meeting and returned to join you afterwards."

Ron gagged again. "That's when we..."

"She had to keep up appearances," Hermione said, guessing why Greengrass had gone as far as she had. "You were her link to us."

"But why would she have pretended to be in a coma for so long?" Anna asked.

"I checked her over myself and she was definitely in a coma," Sirius said. "And since she had old injuries concurrent with crush injuries, I think she allowed Tom or Venant to injure her and put her into that coma before they transported to a Muggle hospital - it wouldn't have taken much to make a member of the staff change the records. I suspect though that they might have done more damage than they intended, prolonging the coma."

"If she was in a coma then how did she manage to pretend to be Parvati without poly..." Hermione stopped before she had finished the question, asking Remus another one. "Do all Unspeakables have a ring like yours?"

"Yes, although their introduction was fairly recent, and yes, Altus had one."

"That answers that question then," Anna said dryly.

"I've still got a question," Neville said. "Why do you think she left Lucy and the others to die slowly rather than just killing them outright?"

"Because she thought we'd all die at Azkaban," Ron said in a disgusted voice. "And she obviously got a kick out of letting them all die painfully, not expecting us to return to save them."

"Now we've figured that out or think we have, for starters we need to have everyone swear an oath to their loyalty and then re-establish the Fidelius on this place," Sirius said, kicking himself for not thinking of it sooner. "And we need to do it now. I'll need someone to take my place as secret keeper just to be on the safe side."

"I'll do it," Justin offered. "With my heir ring it's impossible to tear the memory from my mind and I'll swear an oath to make sure I never blab if I'm ever caught."

Everyone agreed and once it had been done, everyone gathered in the room outside of the medical bay where Remus called for Macclesby. "Macclesby, I really need some of my more potent firewhiskey. Does anyone else need a drink?"

After the day they had had, they all said yes, Ron, more than anyone needing one.

It was soon evident by how quickly Remus was getting drunk that he blamed himself for Parvati. "Even though I couldn't say anything, it's still my fault."

Sirius thought differently. "I don't see how. I should have realized it wasn't her. I identified her in the hospital."

Ron disagreed, sloshing whiskey all over the floor as he waved his glass around while speaking. "I'm the one who should have realized, not you two. I had sex with her and didn't work out it wasn't Parvati."

"You were just glad to get Parvati back, just as we're glad to get Tonks back..." Sirius trailed off and he put down his glass of Scotch. "I think I'd better have a word with her. I don't want a secondary spy in our midst."

Tonks was still awake in Sirius' room and she recoiled upon seeing him. "You're dead!"

"It's a long story I'm not going to go into," Sirius said, turning as Remus joined him having realized how Tonks would react.

"Tonks, Sirius is on our side and one of us will fill you in once things settle down. But for now you're the one whose identity is in question."

Sirius aimed his wand in her direction, petrifying her and shoving his wand in her hand. "I need you to swear an oath that you are truly Nymphadora Tonks and that you are not working for Tom, that you have not betrayed us and that you would never willingly betray us."

Tonks did as Sirius asked, a bright light washing over her. "Why did I have to do that?"

Sirius took back his wand. "Sorry, but we've just discovered that someone we thought we knew wasn't who she seemed. It resulted in an attack on some of our team and they were left to die. If we hadn't had to abort the attack on Azkaban, we wouldn't have gotten back in time to save them."

Tonks' stomach rumbled interrupting whatever Sirius had been about to say next. "Sorry, but I'm pretty hungry. I've been living on berries and tree shoots. Dad taught me how to survive in the wild when we went camping – I thought it was a crazy Muggle thing at the time but now I'm glad he did."

"I'm so sorry," Sirius said as he realized that in the panic over Lucy and the others he hadn't even checked his cousin out. "Let me get you a nutritional potion and something light to eat."

Remus yelled out for Macclesby and then gave his instructions while Sirius checked Tonks over.

"You're lucky. Nothing much worse than a few scratches and malnutrition." He handed her a sedative as Macclesby reappeared with some soup. "Once you've finished eating, take this. We'll talk more in the morning."

When Sirius and Remus returned, everyone else had decided to put aside their alcohol in favor of reviewing their memories of their interactions with Parvati, something Anna had suggested might be of benefit. Pansy thankfully had had little to do with Parvati and her memories had been quickly sought and eliminated. The others, however, took longer, and after hours of sifting through their memories, everyone was thoroughly relieved to note that no-one had given up Pansy or Gareth.

Justin dropped to the floor, sighing with relief. "Thank goodness. I still don't know how we didn't tell her about Gareth."

"It's probably because we expected her to know already," Sirius said after a moment's reflection. "And with Pansy and Remus living at Hogwarts and then at River Dene, it kept them out of the limelight."

"I'm glad they were," Anna said. "But I imagine Tom would have taken his retribution by now if Greengrass had given Pansy or Remus up."

"What I don't understand is why Tom didn't request my presence tonight," Sirius said worriedly.

"He only had a medium sized contingent with him," Anna reminded him. "He obviously knew how many of us there were and decided he didn't need you."

"Then he can't know who I really am," Sirius decided. "Which is a good thing because I'm going to deal with Greengrass."

Ron's eyes widened. "What will you do with her?"

"Bring her back here to be tried," Anna said without hesitation.

"And if I can't get her back here?"

"Then kill her," Remus said. "I'll sign off on it."

"Remus..."

"No, Anna," Remus said, not wanting to hear Anna's argument. "Sirius' safety and his position as a spy is more important than ever now and I'd rather he kill Greengrass than risk himself getting her out."

Eventually Anna agreed, but it was noted that she disapproved. Her disapproval signaled the first sign of dissent between the new head of BritAD and Ignotus.

The Next Morning

Tonks joined the others at Remus' home, feeling a little better now that she had some food inside of her. She had also heard about Sirius' escape from the Ministry. "I've heard your side and now I suppose you want to know how I managed to escape from Azkaban."

"Yes," Sirius said as he took a mouthful of coffee. "I can't imagine you managed to get out like I did."

"I didn't."

"I'd like to know as well," Anna said, leaning back into her chair. "I remember seeing you at the Alpha site but then I didn't see you again."

Tonks confirmed Anna was correct. "I did make it to the Alpha site and then we were hit. I remember a flash of light and when I came around, I was lying face down on the ground. I could hear what was being said about the women..." She shuddered before she went on. "So I morphed into a man. Then I was stunned and when I came to once again I was in Azkaban in a prison cell."

"So how did you get out?"

"I got lucky," Tonks said. "I don't know why or how, but somehow, on the third day, the prison guard forgot to lock my door. I stood for what seemed like forever just looking at the door that was ajar before I finally got up the courage to make a run for it."

"You must have been terrified."

"I was." Tonks shivered as she remembered the cold fear that had gripped her as she had made her way out of the prison. "It took me two days to get out. I had to keep hiding until I knew each corridor was clear. I was terrified that the Dementors would get me but they didn't and I eventually got onto the Island proper."

"Nobody searched for you?" Hermione asked as Tonks visibly sagged.

"Let me get her onto a sofa," Sirius interjected before Tonks could answer, and he helped his cousin to move across from the breakfast table to the sofa in Remus' front room.

Tonks slumped onto the sofa and once she was settled, she finally answered Hermione's question. "I heard lots of shouting about an hour or so after I vanished. I'd hidden beneath a grate in the floor – it was really smelly and horrible and I thought I'd be sick but I was more afraid than disgusted so I stayed hidden. I used more grates as I headed through the prison, and... and..."

It was then she broke down, and when it became obvious she would be unable to go on, Sirius ordered everyone out as he began to comfort his cousin.

14th February 2000

Pansy had expected to be doing something similar for Hermione, but so far she hadn't shown much sign of needing any comfort. "It isn't healthy."

Remus, who was marking papers, agreed. "I know but she clams up every time I try and talk to her about Harry."

"Likewise," Pansy admitted. "I asked her to have dinner with us here tonight, but she said she had some work to do for Anna."

To help pass the time, Hermione had begun helping Anna with the paperwork that was now beginning to spring up and she was discovering she was rather good at running an office. It was also something she could pour her efforts into wholly.

Completely unaware that she was being discussed, Hermione was in fact sitting in Justin's flat, Anna having nothing for her to do and Justin asking her to come back with him. "Neville's out on a date, Ron is out with Bill, and so that leaves just me and Julian in."

"Did I hear right that Luna is also out on a date?" Hermione asked, having caught the tail end of someone's conversation as she had walked through Seashore.

Justin grinned. "With Neville."

Hermione gasped. "Luna and Neville?"

"It's more of a friends' date to be honest," Justin said as he passed Hermione a glass of wine. "Neither of them wanted to single for Valentine's Day..."

"It's Valentine's Day?" Hermione asked distractedly.

"Hermione to Earth," Julian teased good-naturedly. "Where have you been the last few days?"

"Behind a desk," Hermione snapped, although she had no idea why she suddenly felt angry.

"You honestly didn't remember?" Justin asked gently.

"No, and without Harry being here, why should I care?"

"He's going to come back," Justin said, still not having given up on his friend.

Hermione, however, had and it was Justin's absolute belief in Harry that finally made Hermione flip. "Justin, are you stupid? He's not even sent us a note to tell us he's okay and it's been three months! Three fucking months!"

"Hermione, perhaps he can't..."

"Can't ask someone to send me a line?" Hermione screeched, her feelings about Harry suddenly coming to the surface. "Take two minutes out of his fucking precious day to write a note to say 'Hermione, I think you're a whore and I don't love you anymore?'"

"You know as well as I do that Harry didn't honestly believe that."

"So he thought he'd just try and kill Remus for fun?" Hermione asked, her voice sugary sweet, before it became full of venom. "Don't you get it? He thinks I cheated on him and it's obvious he hasn't changed his mind. So guess what, I'm done waiting up until the early hours hoping I'll get a message; hoping that he'll suddenly come through the door; hoping that he still loves me."

Hermione started to cry. "I hate him! I hate him! I hate him!"

Julian ducked as Hermione's wine glass and its contents went hurtling by his head. He gave Justin a worried look.

As Hermione's sobs began to turn into howls, Justin disappeared as Julian moved to hold Hermione, who didn't even seem to register him being there.

Sirius winced as he apparated into the room, Hermione's cries sounding like an animal in pain. He decided to give her a minute to calm down before he tried to administer a sedative but when the cries simply got worse, he stunned her, and with Julian's help, he gave her a sedative, Julian rubbing her throat. He then carried her to

Julian's room and placed her on the bed. "I'll take her back with me when I leave. What happened?"

Justin explained exactly what had gone on. "...and I didn't know what else to do but get you."

"You did the right thing," Sirius said. "I was surprised that she hadn't cracked sooner."

"I think it was the whole Valentine's Day thing that did it," Julian said. "She was fine until she realized that."

"I think telling her that Harry was coming back did it, to be honest, Jules," Justin said to his cousin. "I think she's given up on him."

"But you haven't, have you?" Sirius asked.

"Never," Justin said, his belief in Harry still untouched. "I know that there must be a good reason if he isn't back yet."

"I think I'd keep that opinion to yourself in front of Hermione though," Julian said, before turning to Sirius. "Do you want to join us for a drink and stay over? You can bunk in with me if you want."

Although Sirius had adopted Justin, it was Julian that he had become surprisingly close to. "I'd like that, although I don't think sharing a room with Hermione would be a good move."

Julian grinned. "Then we'll all bunk down in Justin's room, if he doesn't mind."

"I don't," Justin said, grabbing a glass to pour wine into. "We can be three sad lonely bachelors together."

Julian looked over at his bedroom door. "If that's what relationships do to you, then I'm happy with the single life."

"I'll drink to that," Justin said, Sirius echoing his toast.

When she came around the next day, Hermione apologized for her actions and, just as the three men had, she swore off relationships forever, little knowing that she would change her mind when she least expected it and at the most awkward time possible.

22nd April 2000

Hermione was standing outside and watching the waves when she heard someone coming up behind her and turned around. "Hi."

"I was worried about you," Remus said as he sat down on a large rock. "You've been quiet all day and then you vanished."

"I'm just fed up with nothing happening," Hermione said honestly. "I'm up to date with my paperwork, you don't need my help drawing up lessons, and I feel as though we're all stuck in limbo and getting nowhere."

"Would you like to go into town?" Remus suggested, thinking that Hermione was starting to get cabin fever.

"I'm not in the mood," Hermione said. "I think I'll go back to my room."

"I've got an idea. Why don't you spend the rest of the Easter holidays at my home – I know you hate it here."

"I'd feel bad leaving Luna," Hermione said, not wanting to desert her friend.

"Luna is knee deep in her studies," Remus reminded her, Luna having decided to become a nurse so that she could help out and so, between them Lucy and Sirius were putting her through her paces. "She won't miss you and you need to get out before you die of boredom."

"Justin said the same. He offered to let me stay at his flat on the sofa but it's too much of a man place if you know what I mean," Hermione said, the flat still being occupied by Ron as well as Julian, Bill and Neville.

Remus let out a laugh. "I do, and I'm quite sure you don't want to listen to Ron's snoring. Justin said he can hear him through the bedroom wall." He then reiterated his offer. "So please, stay with me."

"I'll be okay here," Hermione said, demurring.

"Hermione, I'm not taking no for an answer," Remus said. "Come back to mine and we'll all go out for a few day trips and maybe go see a show. To be honest Pansy is bored. With you staying here as often as you do to help Anna, she misses you."

"I miss her too," Hermione admitted, before deciding to heck with it. She was miserable and everyone was right, she was dying of boredom. "I'll just pack some clothes and meet you back at your place."

As Remus predicted, Pansy was delighted to see Hermione and together the three of them made plans to spend some time together looking around the Museums in Birmingham and Manchester, something they all enjoyed.

Hermione had been there for three days when, after dressing for dinner, she walked into the sitting room and saw Remus reading a note, a slight frown on his face. "Is everything okay?"

"It's just a note from Pansy to say she's having dinner with Patrick," Remus said, putting it down. "And we should go ahead and go out tonight without her."

Hermione also frowned worriedly. "I hope everything is okay – she really wanted to see Les Miserables."

"I know," Remus said, also aware of how much Pansy had been looking forward to seeing her first Muggle musical. "I'm disappointed for her."

"You two seem to get on well," Hermione said as she picked up her wrap. "Are you thinking of getting together?"

"No," Remus said immediately as he checked his jacket pocket for the tickets. "She's not my type."

Hermione experienced a moment of relief and then alarm that she had felt relief and then relief again when Remus didn't seem to notice. "Shall we go then? I don't want to lose our dinner booking."

Remus held out his arm politely. "If you insist."

"Actually I'll meet you there," Hermione said quickly. "I don't like side-apparition."

Remus vanished and Hermione gave herself a minute or two before leaving to join him.

It was almost midnight by the time they returned home, having stopped in a bar for an after-dinner drink and even now Hermione couldn't stop talking about what she had seen. "I still think that that was the best performance of a musical I've ever attended."

Remus smiled indulgently. "I think you've said that about twenty times now."

Hermione went red. "Sorry but it was just so, well..." She stopped and smiled. "I'd better find something else to talk about before I end up making you as bored as I was at Seashore."

"You'd have to try a lot harder than you're doing," Remus said, handing her a glass of champagne that Macclesby had appeared with and taking one himself. "To a successful evening away from the cares of the wizarding world."

"A successful evening," Hermione said and she tapped Remus' glass before taking a sip of the champagne. "Isn't this rather indulgent and expensive? I thought we were on a budget." The tickets to the musical had been a gift from Justin in an effort to try to cheer her up.

"We are. Sirius, however, deigned to go into Grimmauld Place and raid the wine cellar there – he dropped off several bottles of liquor and about ten bottles of varying wines for me," Remus said in explanation. "This particular champagne was, I believe, grown specifically for the Black Family."

"It's very nice," Hermione said, taking another sip. "Very nice."

"Do you want anything to eat with that, Miss Hermione?"

Hermione smiled down at Macclesby. "No, thank you. You've done enough as it is waiting up for us."

Macclesby blushed with pleasure and after checking with Remus, he vanished to his small bedroom situated behind the pantry.

"I love him," Hermione said with a sigh. "He's so adorable."

"He loves you too," Remus said honestly before grinning. "Although I have to admit he'd throw us all over for Lucy."

Hermione gave a shout of laughter, unable to help herself. "Sorry, but it's funny how he can't do enough for her when she's here."

"I was half afraid when she moved out that Macclesby would move out with her," Remus said, sitting down and patting the sofa beside him.

Hermione gratefully sat down and kicked off her high heeled shoes. "They make me taller but I know I'm going to pay a terrible price in the morning for my vanity."

"That's what cushioning spells are for," Remus said.

"In my shoes?"

"Let me show you," Remus said, kneeling down and picking up Hermione's shoes.

Hermione watched in fascination as Remus aimed his wand at the shoes and cast a cushioning charm. She then stood up and tried on the shoes when he told her she could.

"Aaah, that feels wonderful." She smiled happily and hugged Remus. "I could kiss you for this." As she looked up into Remus' face, Hermione's stomach tightened as her gaze met his. In that moment the playful air vanished.

Remus reached out and brushed Hermione's hair out of her face, asking in a soft voice, "Then why don't you?"

Not knowing whether to flee or to make an excuse, Hermione did neither and instead she closed her eyes as Remus lowered his head and gently grazed her lips before she pulled away.

"I need to sit down."

Remus passed her her glass of champagne once they were both seated. "I've made you uncomfortable."

"It isn't that," Hermione said, struggling to find the words she was looking for. "It's just that I never expected anything like this to happen."

"I thought when you were asking about my feelings for Pansy that you were asking because you were interested in me," Remus admitted, having felt Hermione's changing emotions of panic and relief when she had been asking him and Pansy, although he hadn't commented on them. "If you're not, then please, just say so."

"I..." Hermione said before licking her lips and saying, "I honestly don't know if I am. Until just now I haven't given it much thought but..."

Remus provided the response he thought Hermione had been about to give. "But you still have feelings for Harry."

Hermione shook her head, truly believing she was over him. "Not anymore. He's been missing for almost six months, Remus, and he hasn't once bothered to send me a message."

"So what was the but for?"

"I was going to say 'but I think I might be ready to move on'."

"Do you honestly feel ready?"

"Yes, but I didn't realize it until just now when you wanted to kiss me."

"It's funny you should say that," Remus said with a smile. "I only realized how I felt about you when we came out of the theatre tonight and you were almost glowing with happiness."

"You thought I was glowing?"

"I thought you were beautiful."

Hermione's stomach went into freefall at the look Remus was giving her. "I'm not beautiful."

"Tonight you were," Remus said, as he leant forward. And this time when his lips touched Hermione's, he didn't keep the kiss simple or brief, and Hermione didn't pull away.

The Next Morning

Remus was woken by Macclesby. "What time is it?"

"Seven," Macclesby said, before getting to the point of his interruption of Remus' sleep. "I'm sorry to wake you, Master Remus, but Mister Harry is here and he wants to see you and Miss Hermione."

"I'll go tell her," Remus said, deciding that it would come better from him rather than Macclesby. "Tell Harry we'll be along shortly."

Next Chapter: Harry returns to Hogwarts; Sirius deals with Greengrass; Luna has big news.

Note: I'm currently moving house and so this will be the last chapter for at least three or so weeks until I get internet set up as I won't have internet access after tomorrow.

Chapter 68: Rocking the Boat

It was less than two minutes later after receiving the news about Harry that was Remus was knocking on Hermione's door. "Hermione, can I come in?"

After sleepily coming to, Hermione pulled the sheet up to cover her nightgown. "Yes."

Once inside, Remus didn't hesitate to pass on the news. "Hermione, I'm sorry to bother you so early, and there's no gentle way of saying this but Harry's back."

Hermione stiffened. "He's here?"

"Yes, and he wants to see us."

Remus had dropped the wards against Harry entering his home when everyone had moved into Seashore.

Hermione took several deep intakes of air. "Oh God!"

Remus' stomach plummeted. "You feel guilty about kissing me last night now, don't you?"

"I don't," Hermione said in a fierce voice, although in all honesty, she did.

And Remus knew it, calling her bluff. "So I take it you don't want to tell Harry about us then."

Hermione shook her head, confirming Remus' suspicions. "I don't think Harry learning that we're together the day he gets back is a good idea."

Remus plastered on a smile to hide his hurt. "Then we won't tell him yet. However I should go see him."

Not realizing that she had managed to upset Remus, Hermione agreed. "If you do that, I'll get dressed and join you when I'm ready."

When Remus reached his sitting room, it was to discover a very different Harry than the one he had last seen. "Harry..."

Harry was unused to seeing Remus acting so warily around him. "Hello, you almost look surprised to see me."

"I'll be honest, Harry. After so much time has passed, I didn't ever expect to see you again," Remus said, taking a seat on his sofa.

"I didn't feel ready to come back until now." Harry sat down opposite Remus when Remus waved his hand towards the chair.

"Where have you been?"

"Here, there, everywhere."

"And you didn't think about contacting me to let me know you were okay?"

"I wasn't ready."

Remus recognized evasion when he saw it and so he rephrased his earlier question. "Perhaps instead you'd care to tell me where you've been – here, there and everywhere hardly tells me anything at all."

"After I disappeared from the field, I went to hospital to be treated for my broken jaw, and then I left for Europe, after which I moved on to the Middle East and then to India. I really wanted to go after you but the voice of reason told me not to, so instead I left until I had worked through my anger and then my shame." Harry didn't mention that Sirius had been the voice of reason. "However, it took me longer than I had expected it to."

Remus knew Harry wasn't being entirely honest about everything and he put it down to what he saw as the crux of the problem. "You've totally embraced the Dark Arts, haven't you?"

"I have," Harry said, not bothering to deny it. "And to be honest, I feel better than I have done since I woke up after the poisoning incident."

"I can actually tell you're telling the truth, at least about that."

"I know what you're thinking," Harry said, as he casually lounged back against the chair. "You think I'm dangerous and I'm going to

hurt someone. I understand that. Six months ago I tried to kill you because I believed you were having an affair with Hermione... a side effect of too much Dark Magic, I know. However, now I know I was being paranoid. You'd never do that, even though I suspect you do like Hermione."

"I do, very much," Remus said openly, sticking to his previous promise to Harry to be honest, even though he was a little nervous at doing so given the current situation, Harry's casual air making him feel more than a little off balance. "Intellectually she's my equal, she's become an attractive young woman, and I like her company."

"Most people wouldn't be that honest," Harry said, a small smile playing across his lips. "But that's something I know I can count on from you."

Remus' eyes narrowed at the somewhat amused note in Harry's tone of voice. "Yes, you can."

"However, as usual, there's a but, isn't there?" Harry asked, although it was more of a statement rather than a question.

"You seem different, more so than simply going over the edge," Remus said softly, trying to figure out what it was about Harry that had changed.

"Let's just say I had a few telling experiences," Harry said, not wishing to go into detail. "But I'm still me; I just have more confidence and feel more comfortable in my own skin now."

Harry might have been comfortable but there was something about him that Remus found distinctly disquieting: Harry not only acted more confidently and spoke more self-assuredly but he was dressed differently... in wizarding robes and a cloak, which was totally out of character for Harry, who usually preferred Muggle jeans and a tee-shirt or sweater. He was also wearing his hair longer, tied in a ponytail with a black ribbon.

"So, how is Hermione? Macclesby said she was staying here."

"She is. She didn't like Seashore, so I offered both her and Pansy a room here."

"I appreciate you looking out for her."

"I don't need looking out for, and if I did, it would no longer be any of your business, Harry," Hermione said as she entered the room, having stood outside the door to the room for a moment while she prepared herself.

Harry shot to his feet, his face lighting up at the sight of his former girlfriend. "Hermione, hello."

"So, how are you?" Hermione asked, her tone clipped, noticing, just as Remus had, how different Harry looked.

"I'm well," Harry said, hating how cagey his former girlfriend was being around him. "You?"

"I'm well," Hermione echoed.

"I won't hurt you," Harry said, noticing that Hermione was making no attempt to move closer and that she had her wand already drawn.

"Forgive me if I don't believe you," Hermione said, keeping her distance and keeping her wand held out.

Harry withdrew his own wand, unable to miss Hermione's wand jump in her hand as if she expected him to assault her. "I swear on my life and my magic that I'm not here to attack you, Hermione. I'm simply here to talk."

Before Hermione could respond, Pansy entered the room. "I hope that goes for me as well."

Harry smiled at the sight of the dark-haired girl who was wearing a smile that matched his own. "It does."

"Good," Pansy said before she walked over to Harry and slapped him firmly across the face. "That's for letting those of us who love you think you'd left us." Then, without any reservations, she drew him into a hug. "I've missed you and I'm glad you're back."

As she released him, Harry touched his cheek, smiling ruefully as he did so. "I should have said no when you asked for my assurances."

"You deserved it and you know it," Pansy said without rancor as she sat down beside Remus, Hermione finally lowering her wand and sitting on the other side of her. "Now, are you going to tell us where you've been?"

"I've just told Remus."

"Well, now you can tell us," Pansy said bossily.

And so Harry repeated the spiel he had given to Remus, before asking, "What have I missed here?"

It was mostly Pansy who covered what had gone on in Harry's absence. Eventually though they got down to what Harry wanted and it was Remus who put it into words.

"So now we've exchanged stories, I imagine you want me to tell you that it's okay to come back into the fold, so to speak."

"I do," Harry said, well aware that this probably wasn't going to be a cakewalk if everyone else turned out to be as confrontational as Remus and Hermione were being.

"I would say yes, but I'm going to have to talk to everyone else first," Remus said, not willing to answer for the others. "We'll be back as soon as we have."

"You don't trust me, do you?" Harry asked, after Remus had ordered both Pansy and Hermione to join him.

"What do you expect?" Remus asked bluntly. "You tried to kill Hermione and me the last time you saw us, and you injured Justin. And even though I do want you back in the fold, Harry, it's going to take time before I trust you enough to consider leaving anyone alone with you, not even with the oath you've just made."

"I'll stay," Pansy said, not having a problem with Harry. "If he said he won't hurt me, then I believe him."

"I'll go with you," Hermione said, moving to join Remus.

Harry expected as much despite his oath. "Then I'll wait here with Pansy."

It was nearly ten minutes later when the duo returned together with Justin, Luna, Ron, Neville and Sirius.

A beaming Justin was the first one to step forward. "Harry, I hardly believed it when Remus said you were back."

Harry immediately moved towards Justin, his hand held out. "I am and I owe you an apology for hurting you the way I did. You're my best friend, Justin, and I hope you still feel the same way."

Although he, like the others, had been warned by Remus about the difference in Harry, Justin was still more than a little shocked by how different his friend looked. However, as he had done since Harry had gone rogue, he stood by his friend. "I've never felt any differently."

Harry found himself being hugged very firmly before he clapped Justin on the back and then released him. As Justin stepped away, Harry turned to Sirius. "It's good to see you again."

"You certainly surprised me by turning up," Sirius said, pulling Harry towards him for a hug.

Harry gave a genuine grin at Sirius' comment, letting the man hug him, before he began to greet the rest of his former friends, apologizing to them all before they hugged him and accepted the apology. In the end, only Hermione and Remus were left.

"Hermione, Remus, I owe you both the biggest apology of all. I know that you only did what you did to help me and I treated you like shit. Therefore I deserve whatever you have to say, and I'll accept whatever you decide."

Remus went first. "I've long forgiven you for what you did, Harry, as I know you weren't yourself. However, I'm not sure yet what form any future relationship between us will take. Right now, although I still love you, I don't trust you. And as much as it pains me to say it, you've lost the respect I once held for you, not because you tried to kill me but because you could have let me know you were safe and you didn't."

This hurt dreadfully but Harry knew he shouldn't have expected anything else. "I understand and I'm going to do whatever it takes to earn that respect and trust back."

"I hope you do," Remus said, before hugging Harry and then stepping back.

Hermione took her place in front of Harry. "Like Remus, I don't trust you, Harry, and I'm not sure when I will again. Again, you could have let us know you were okay but you didn't and I went through hell thinking all sorts of terrible things had happened to you. If it hadn't been for my friends here, I wouldn't have made it through this."

"I'm so sorry, Hermione, and I'd like to explain why I didn't make contact with you."

"I accept your apology, Harry, but right now I'm not ready to listen to your excuses."

Hermione then turned away and left the room, Remus and Luna going after her, neither of them wanting her to be alone.

Following Hermione into her bedroom, it was Luna who took her hand, feeling it trembling. "Can I get you anything?"

"No," Hermione said softly, shaking her head and squeezing Luna's hand back. "It's just that seeing him was tougher than I expected it to be. After not seeing him for so long and then he turns up and seems to expect forgiveness because he said he's sorry..."

"Are you going to forgive him?" Luna asked hopefully.

"Maybe one day but not right now," Hermione said, wishing she could be alone with Remus and talk to him about what had happened.

"So you don't think the two of you will get back together?"

Here Remus looked askance at Hermione, who was obviously torn, and so he answered for her. "I think it's a little too soon for Hermione to make a decision like that."

Luna, like everyone else in their group, was well aware that Remus had become Hermione's shoulder to cry on after her breakdown in February and so she left the two of them alone. "I'll go back out there."

As Luna left, Remus kept his spot, leaning against Hermione's dresser and he got straight to the point. "Hermione, if you tell me that you don't want to enter into a relationship with me now that Harry's back, I'll understand."

"You really think I want Harry back after what he's put me through?"

"I don't know. Only you know the answer to that."

Luna walked back into the sitting room. "Hermione's talking to Remus."

Ron took the hint and stood up. "I think we'd better go."

One by one the others all said the same, Pansy reluctantly leaving with Luna.

Justin turned to Harry. "Come to my flat and have breakfast - I want to know where you've been and what you've been doing. Remus said you've been traveling."

"I have," Harry confirmed. "And I'd love to come for breakfast but give me half an hour."

Justin shook hands with Harry and left.

Now that only Sirius and Harry remained, Sirius asked, "Do you want go to Potter Place first?"

"Yes."

Potter Place

When Harry appeared almost noiselessly beside him, Sirius said, "I meant it when I said I was surprised to hear you'd come back. I wasn't expecting you for another month or so."

"I changed my mind about staying away but even so I've left it too long and now I've fucked everything up with Hermione, haven't I? I can see she wants nothing to do with me."

"I don't want to say I told you so, but I told you so, Harry," Sirius said to him as they headed to sit down in the study. "You should have let me tell her that you were okay."

"But I wasn't," Harry said as he poured himself and Sirius a scotch despite the earliness of the hour. "And if you hadn't stood by me I would never have made it through this."

"I know that, Harry," Sirius acknowledged. "But it's time now to let others in."

Well aware of whom Sirius was talking about, Harry immediately shook his head. "Absolutely not. Remus already doesn't trust me – telling him the truth would hardly win him over, and even though I intended to tell Hermione the truth on my return here, her reception doesn't exactly inspire me to open up to her just yet either."

"I agree about Hermione," Sirius said, before urging Harry to once more come clean to Remus about what he had gone through. "But Remus needs to know."

"No!" Harry said in a firm voice that brooked no argument, before it softened somewhat. "Right now, a little like Hermione, I don't think he'd understand, even though I know it's important."

"What about Justin then?" Sirius suggested. "He never gave up on you."

Harry smiled. "He's amazing – I could never have asked for someone as loyal as Justin for a best friend."

"So will you tell him?"

"Yes," Harry decided. "And eventually maybe Pansy – she's never been one to judge – like Luna, she told me she still loves me when she hugged me, something Hermione didn't – then again she didn't hug me either."

"Harry..."

"I know, I know," Harry said, interrupting Sirius. "You warned me to expect the worst but fool that I am I still kept hoping that she would take me back."

Sirius found himself repeating what he had told Harry numerous times over the previous few months. "You hurt her terribly, Harry, and Valentine's Day was the straw that broke the camel's back. And whereas I'm sure she'd have forgiven you attacking her if you'd made contact with her before then, by letting it drag on, I think you may have irreparably damaged your relationship with her."

"I suppose I should take comfort in the fact that she hasn't moved on." He then looked worriedly at Sirius, whom he hadn't spoken to in almost a month. "Has she?"

"If you mean is she dating anyone, then the answer is no."

"At least that's something." Harry put down his glass of scotch. "I'd better head out to Justin's."

"If you're going to tell him, I think the sooner the better," Sirius said, also putting down his glass. "And I think you'd be better off doing it here where there's more privacy. So I'll go fetch him and we can tell him together."

"You're going to tell him you knew all along where I was?"

Sirius nodded. "If you're being honest with him, then so should I. Although I don't think he's going to be very happy with me for hiding the truth."

"I think he'll understand," Harry said. "If he can forgive me, he'll forgive you. He's your son."

"Only by adoption," Sirius reminded him.

"He cares about you, Sirius," Harry countered. "He'll forgive you."

"If he doesn't, then I'm blaming you," Sirius said with a smile, fairly certain that Harry was right.

Harry hugged the man who had replaced Remus as his sounding board and his mentor over the last six months, before letting him go so that he could go to collect Justin.

Potter Place - The Next Day

Hearing two cracks, Harry walked out of the dining room and was surprised to see Hermione and Remus standing in the hallway. "Hello..."

"We need to talk to you," Remus said without preamble.

Harry's heart leapt, believing that Remus had talked Hermione around into listening to his explanations and he decided that despite his initial reticence to talk to Remus as well, he would do so now. "Come into the dining room. I was just having lunch."

"You're alone?" Remus asked as he held out a chair for Hermione to sit down, before taking a seat next to her.

"Yes, it's just me," Harry said as he sat back down. "Can I pour you both a cup of tea? Or would you like something to eat?"

"Just tea is fine," Hermione said, the idea of food not exactly palatable with a churning stomach.

"It's also fine for me and I can pour it," Remus said, before picking up the teapot and pouring out the tea for both him and Hermione.

Harry smiled ruefully as he watched Remus. "This feels a little strange to be truthful. It feels far too stiff and formal."

Remus passed a large mug of tea to Hermione, saying, "It's going to take some time before things will feel less awkward."

Plucking up her courage, Hermione used Remus' words as springboard for what she needed to tell Harry. "And what I have to say isn't going to make things any easier."

"You're going to tell me that you don't think we can ever be friends again, aren't you?" Harry asked in a glum voice, pushing his half-eaten lunch away, his own appetite suddenly fleeing.

"No, I'm not," Hermione said, watching hope leap onto Harry's face, making what she had to tell him even harder.

"So you're saying we can be friends again?"

"One day, yes," Hermione said truthfully, having talked things out with Remus and coming to that conclusion in the early hours of the morning. "If you can deal with what I'm going to tell you."

Harry could see that Hermione was struggling when she hesitated. "Hermione, whatever it is you have to say I swear I won't go off the deep end again. Attacking you that night was foolish. I should have known you weren't having an affair."

He then caught the odd look that passed between his former girlfriend and his guardian and a tiny trickle of doubt slid in. "You weren't, were you?"

"No, Harry, I wasn't!" Hermione said in an angry voice.

"I'm sorry," Harry immediately said. "It's just that where you're concerned... well, you know."

"She does, Harry," Remus said, taking the reins from Hermione, who by now was close to tears. "Harry, since that night, some things have changed for Hermione, actually some things have changed for us both..."

"Changed?" Harry interrupted.

"I'm seeing someone, Harry," Hermione broke in, not thinking it fair to put the entire burden on Remus' shoulders.

Harry's stomach felt as though it had been weighed down with lead at Hermione's confession and he stood up, barely able to believe what he had heard. "But just yesterday Sirius said that you weren't dating anyone!"

"And as far as he knew he was telling was the truth – Harry, he doesn't know," Hermione said, her voice trembling, telling Harry proving as hard as she had expected. "Nobody does."

Given that it had been Remus who had talked about how things had changed, Harry called Hermione on her statement. "You obviously told Rem...", Harry broke off as the penny suddenly dropped. "How long have you been seeing him?"

Remus also stood up, moving to put himself between Harry and Hermione as a cold look slid across Harry's face. "Hermione, you should go."

"I said I wouldn't go off the deep end and I meant it," Harry said, although his voice was curt and it was obvious he was angry. "So tell me, how long?"

"Two days," Remus said, still keeping himself between Harry and Hermione. "It's why Sirius didn't know – it's why nobody knew, not even us to be truthful. We only realized how we felt about each other the night before you came back."

Harry was devastated and he was well aware that Remus would know that. "I think you should leave."

Remus was more than a little alarmed by the despair and anger he could feel coming from Harry. "Harry, as much as I understand you want to be alone, we have more to say and besides, I don't think it's a good idea to leave you alone right now."

Harry didn't even look at Remus as he said, "I don't want to hear it. Just get the fuck out!"

"I'm not leaving you alone like this."

"Remus, just fuck off and take her with you!"

Noticing Harry's hair beginning to rise, Remus decided to do as Harry said, and, taking Hermione's hand, he side-apparated her to his home.

"I'm going back."

Hermione was pale and shaking. "Remus, he'll kill you."

"He swore an oath yesterday..."

"An oath that only included me in that moment in time, and in this particular moment, I'm afraid that Harry has every intention of killing you if you go back!"

"Even so, I can't leave things like this."

"I know but I really don't think that's a good idea right now. You should send Sirius or Justin," Hermione suggested. "Pansy said Harry spent all day with them yesterday."

"Why you didn't me last night when we were talking?" Remus asked in surprise.

"Because she only told me just before we left here today," Hermione responded.

"In that case..." Remus called out, "Macclesby."

Macclesby appeared, bowing low. "Yes, Master Remus?"

"Find Sirius and Justin and tell them Harry needs them at Potter Place and that's it urgent."

"Yes, Master Remus."

In the end it was Luna who went to Harry's aid, Sirius having gone out for the day with Justin to talk more - nobody knew where and even Macclesby couldn't track them down. So Luna had volunteered to go, refusing Neville's offer to accompany her, believing she was quite safe with Harry despite Macclesby's protestations otherwise.

The moment she apparated into Potter Place almost twenty minutes after Remus had left, Luna knew something terrible had happened - Harry was as white as a sheet and had an open bottle of scotch in his hand, but he wasn't drinking from it – he was simply staring at the wall. "Harry?"

When he didn't answer, she moved over to his side, placing a hand on his arm. "Harry, what's wrong?"

It was then that Harry realized he wasn't alone and he turned to look at the blonde girl who was touching him. "Two days, Luna, two fucking days!"

This totally confused Luna. "I'm sorry?"

"Hermione's seeing Remus."

Luna gave a small smile and attempted to allay Harry's fears, unaware that she was completely wrong. "No, Harry, she's not. You just thought they were dating."

"I'm not losing it," Harry said, well aware what Luna was thinking. "They came here this morning and told me that they've been fucking for two days!"

Now the urgency behind Macclesby's appearance and the two days Harry had blurted out when Luna had arrived made sense. "I didn't know."

Harry made Luna jump as he grabbed her and pulled her close, burying his face in her hair, the bottle of scotch falling to the ground, its contents leaking out, not that Harry noticed. "It hurts, Luna."

Luna stroked Harry's hair. "I'm here for you, Harry."

"You can't help," said Harry in a dull tone, his voice muffled by hair. "You don't know what I've done and you'd hate me if you knew."

Luna continued stroking Harry's hair, her voice even gentler than it had been. "I'll never hate you, Harry. You're my oldest friend and I love you. So rather than drinking out of that bottle, let me get you a glass and we can sit and talk."

"I haven't touched it."

"But I know you're probably going to," Luna said quite correctly, picking up the bottle from the floor.

"I don't want to talk about Hermione."

"We can talk about Snorkacks and the research I've been doing."

This distracted Harry for a moment. "Research?"

"Yes, at the Muggle library."

"Luna, if they exist, Snorkacks don't live in the Muggle world."

"Muggles have seen them or think they have," Luna argued, leading Harry to sit down. "And one day I'm going to prove they really do exist."

"How?"

"By doing more research." Luna's face then fell. "But it's going to take me forever. I can't take the books out of the library without a Muggle card thingy and I don't know how to get one. Tonks didn't know either."

"I'll show you," Harry offered, deciding that a day at the library with Luna was a much better proposition than losing himself at the bottom of a bottle of scotch.

"But you need to talk."

"No, I don't."

"She'll come back to you."

"I don't want her anymore," Harry lied.

"Why not?"

"Luna, I'm not talking about her. Let's go to the library."

Despite Harry's refusal to talk about Hermione, Luna didn't give in the entire time they were at the library, resulting in Harry storming off and, despite his intention not to do so, he ended his day at the bottom of a bottle of scotch.

9th May 2000

Having been to the local library yet again, Luna appeared in Potter Place, her arms full of books and a bright smile on her face. "Guess what?"

"What?" Tonks asked, not having seen Luna this animated since the day before her altercation in the library with Harry, who was now

avoiding everyone except for Justin and Pansy, and when he wasn't, he was making everyone feel as miserable as him.

However, on that particular day it didn't seem to be affecting Luna, who declared, "I've met the man I'm going to marry."

"And?"

"He's the Muggle librarian," Luna said, throwing down her books on the table.

"You think you're going to marry a Muggle?" Tonks asked, more than a little bemused by now.

"I know I'm going to marry a Muggle," Luna stated as if there was no question about the issue.

Harry walked into the room at that moment, a glass of scotch in his hand. "And what Muggle idiot is stupid enough to want to get married?"

Luna's face dropped momentarily before filling Harry in. "The librarian, although he doesn't know it yet."

Harry raised an eyebrow and his voice was filled with scorn as he asked, "What happened to 'I'm going to marry a Hufflepuff'?"

"He is a Hufflepuff!"

"But you said he's a Muggle," Tonks said, her confusion obvious.

"He is but his name is Richard Hufflepuff," Luna told Tonks and Harry, a smug look on her face.

"Just because of his name, it doesn't mean you're going to marry him, just like I'm never going to marry Hermione, despite what you thought."

Watching yet another hurt look cross Luna's face, Tonks decided she had had enough of Harry and his moping. "If you can't be nice, then why don't you just bugger off and let Luna tell me about this Richard Hufflepuff."

"Fine!"

As Harry stalked off, Luna sighed and gave his back a sad look. "He is meant to be with Hermione."

Tonks didn't see it ever happening now but she smiled in a placatory manner at Luna. "Perhaps, but right now I want to know about your mysterious Hufflepuff."

"I knew the moment I saw him and I didn't even know his name then," Luna said, whirling happily around, before revealing the most exciting part for her. "And he asked me out to dinner tonight." Then she began to panic. "But I don't know what to wear to a Muggle date."

Tonks put her arm around the smaller girl. "That's why you have me. Let's get you set up for your date." She hesitated. "He doesn't know you're a witch, does he?"

"Not yet, but he will." Luna gave a little giggle. "I can't wait to see his face."

"Luna...!" Tonks warned.

"I won't tell him until it gets serious and it will." Luna was supremely confident as she headed for the stairs. "I just know it will."

Not wanting to put a dampener on the whole thing as Harry had done, Tonks decided to let Luna have her happy moment, following the singing girl up the stairs.

13th May 2000

Harry got up when Remus walked into the sitting room. "Thanks for coming."

"I'll be honest - I was surprised to get your note. I know you must hate me right now..."

Harry broke in. "I'm didn't ask you here to talk about our relationship, Remus."

"Even so, I want you to know that I never wanted to hurt you, Harry, and I'm willing to step aside if that's what you want me to do."

"Don't you think it's a little too late for that?"

"No, I don't. And Hermione and I have already discussed this – we don't want to build a relationship built on somebody else's misery."

Harry shrugged. "You don't have to worry about that. You have my blessing, and if you think Hermione will make you happy and vice versa, I'm not going to stand in your way. In fact it's sort of why I asked you here today. I want to take your place back at Hogwarts."

Remus thought it was a bad decision but he understood why Harry wanted to be away from him and Hermione. "If you think you're up to dealing with Hogwarts then the position is yours again."

"Thank you."

"Just know that I'll be here if you need me."

"I won't," Harry said, and then he walked away, leaving Remus to disapparate.

Justin stepped into the hallway, blocking Harry's path. "How did it go?"

And so Harry told him, Justin interrupting him, surprise in his voice. "You gave them your blessing?"

"I'm partially to blame, Justin, for what happened by not letting everyone I was safe. You know I am."

Having talked in depth with Harry, Justin had to agree. "True, but even so they shouldn't have gotten together."

"Probably not but it's too late to cry over spilt milk."

"So are you going to forgive them?"

Harry unknowingly paraphrased his former girlfriend's comment about him. "One day in the future, but not right now. It hurts too

much." He then changed the subject. "Would you care to join me for a drink?"

"You're not drinking yourself into a stupor again," Justin said firmly. "We're going to go out."

"I don't want to go out."

"Yes, you do."

"Did I tell you I hated you?"

"Every day," Justin said, with a smile, before tugging Harry towards the cloak cupboard.

Resigned to his fate, Harry asked half-heartedly, "So where do you want to go?"

"To see a movie."

Harry tapped his ring, assuming a persona Justin had never seen before. "Then let's go see a movie then."

Justin took in Harry's olive skin, even darker than usual hair and brown eyes. "That looks suits you."

"When I was in Paris, I didn't want to be seen as either Harry Potter or Gareth Edwards," Harry explained. "And at Sirius' suggestion I created James Evans, a non-descript name for a non-descript person."

"I wouldn't call you non-descript, but I doubt I'd give you a second glance."

"That's what I was going for. So, what movie do you want to see?"

Justin shrugged. "We'll see when we get there."

Pansy appeared out of nowhere and she did a double take at the strange man standing with Justin. "Who's your friend?"

"It's me, Harry," Harry said. "Unfortunately I need a disguise as Justin has told me we're going to the movies."

"Room for a third?" Pansy asked hopefully.

Harry held out his free hand. "Only if you don't want to watch some sickly girlie film."

"As if."

And then, smiling, the trio vanished.

24th May 2000

Laurifer Manor

Daphne was hurrying along the corridor intent on heading to the departure room when she ran into Sirius. "Renovo, I'm so sorry."

Sirius picked up his cloak that had fallen to the ground. "That's quite all right. What's the hurry?"

"Altus forgot his appointment book," Daphne said, holding it up. "I was hoping to catch him before he reached his appointment."

"I forgot, you don't have apparition rights, do you?" Sirius asked, knowing full well that she didn't.

"No."

"Could I be of assistance then?" Sirius asked, holding out his arm.

"Thank you," Daphne said, taking it. "He's going to be in courtroom 4."

Sirius disappeared to the Ministry to discover they'd missed Dae. "Since you're too late, do you want to see something interesting?"

Intrigued, Daphne shrugged and took Sirius' arm. "Why not?"

Sirius made two further jumps.

When he finally let go of Daphne, she asked, "Where are we?"

"This is Potter Place," Sirius said, removing his mask. "I believe you've always wondered what it's like especially as you only ever saw Seashore when you were masquerading as Parvati."

Daphne's face contorted. "What a dump that was!" She looked around in delight at the beautiful tapestries that lined the walls of Potter Place. "This is far nicer. How did you ever find it?"

"I'll tell you in a moment," Sirius said as he held out his hand. "Would you like a tour?"

"Yes."

Sirius turned to Pasha, the house-elf he had bought for Harry when they'd been in Paris. "Tell Anna and the others to join me in the drawing room. I have Miss Greengrass with me."

"Yes, Mister Simon, sir." Pasha had already been briefed by Harry as to their alternate identities, which included a great deal more faces than Harry had shown to Pansy and Justin.

Daphne noticed that the house-elf didn't address Sirius as 'Master' and commented on it. "It belongs to this Anna you mentioned?"

"No, she belongs to the owner of the house," Sirius said as he headed towards the drawing room.

Daphne stopped walking and tugged her hand free. "But Potter is the owner, isn't he?"

"He is," Ron said as he walked out into the hallway, his wand drawn. "And since I don't want a hole blown in my friend's walls, I'd like your wands. If you don't give them up, Simon will take them."

Daphne spun around. "You traitorous bastard!"

"I suppose from your point of view I am," Sirius said with a pleasant smile, before it dropped away. "And so, if you wouldn't mind, Ron would like your wands."

Well aware she would be easily bested by Sirius, Daphne handed her wands over to Ron, cursing Sirius as she did. "You really are scum, Blackwell."

"Oh, it gets better," Sirius said, tapping his ring and reverting to his true visage, laughing at the look on Daphne's face. "Not who you expected to see, is it?"

Daphne, of course, had known Sirius was alive having told Tom as much, but discovering he was masquerading as Simon Blackwell was a massive blow. "You won't get away with this."

"I already have, Greengrass," Sirius said in a bored voice. "I disappeared to the Ministry where we checked on your boyfriend together, before I left alone for my apartment, the second place on our trails, so if Tom asks, I can say I left you at the Ministry before leaving to go home."

"Tom will make you all pay for this."

"I don't doubt it, if he knew," Remus said in a deadly voice as he walked into the room, having been alerted by Pasha.

Ron agreed. "Yeah, but right now, snake, you're the one who's going to pay."

"What for?"

"For pretending to be my girlfriend for starters."

Justin, who had walked in behind Remus, having been with him when Pasha had arrived, added to Ron's accusation. "And for trying to kill Luna Lovegood and Lucy Viking as well as Lucy's children, and for being an accessory to the deaths of all those people who Tom murdered in Azkaban."

"If she's proven guilty she'll pay," Anna Jameson said as she too joined the group. "I'm Commander Jameson, head of BritAD, and I'll be conducting your trial."

"These lot have already condemned me and without proof," Daphne protested. "It won't be a fair trial. It will be their word against mine."

Sirius folded his arms as he leant against the wall. "Wrong. It will be my memories of the Inner Circle meetings where you've bragged about you've done that I'll be using."

"You can't discuss that."

"Oh but I can," Sirius said, taking a great deal of pleasure out of riling Daphne. "You see on the night Tom supposedly inducted me, I made a switch with Remus – he's the one who swore the oath of loyalty to Tom, not me. I've been able to sit in on the meetings of the Inner Circle without the protection that Tom thinks he has."

"I know Tom made you swear an oath to keep his secrets when he first captured you, Black," Daphne argued.

"Not exactly," Sirius said, Tom only having ordered Sirius to keep quiet about what had happened to him and about hiding Tom's existence. "And even if he had, it wouldn't apply to your secrets, and so I'll have no problem in handing over certain parts of my memories for Commander Jameson to view, parts which I believe should serve as adequate proof of your guilt."

"You won't be able to prove anything," Daphne said, not willing to confess.

"Then let's watch my memories, which I'm willing to swear on oath are true, and if that's still not enough, we more or less have your admission that you had been masquerading as Parvati from when I apparated in here with you."

Well aware that Harry probably wouldn't appreciate him using his pensieve, given that things between them were still more than a little strained, Remus had brought along his own pensieve, which he put onto the table.

Then, once he had extracted the necessary memories, Sirius grabbed Daphne's arm and plunged her into the pensieve with him.

Remus addressed Justin and Ron. "I'd like you to act as witnesses, so please join Greengrass and Sirius."

It was after the two young men had done so that Anna spoke to Remus about her concerns. "I'd like a different witness than Ron. He's too close to this because of Parvati."

"Anna, Greengrass is going to be found guilty, so it doesn't make any difference who acts as a witness, although you may bring in someone else in addition to Ron and Justin if you wish."

"No," Anna said, although she wasn't happy about it.

They then joined the others.

When they all emerged, Daphne was white and shaking as Sirius offered up the oath he had said he would.

Ron smiled nastily at her. "Not such the big shot now, are we, snake?"

"Do you have anything to say in your defense before I offer up my verdict?" Anna asked.

Defeated, Daphne lowered her head and said nothing, all the fight gone out of her, and she began to cry with fear. Nobody cared.

From out of her pocket, Anna pulled out an obligatory piece of black cloth, placed it on her shoulder, and began. "Daphne Greengrass, I hereby find you guilty of being an accomplice in the deaths of all those in Azkaban prison and of Parvati Patil. I also find you guilty of the attempted murders of Luna Lovegood, and of Lucy, Emsie and Sophia Viking, the sentence for which is death, to be administered herewith by Unspeakable Ignotus."

Harry chose that moment to arrive. He didn't even look at Remus as he spoke to Sirius. "I only just got the message and I don't have much time before my next class."

"You've actually timed it quite nicely, Harry," Sirius said. "Ron and Justin are about to act as witnesses while Greengrass is executed."

Anna meanwhile had turned to face Ron and Justin. "Do you both agree to act as witnesses in this execution?"

Both of them agreed and Daphne reared back in fear as Remus pulled out his wand and he could see the shock in her eyes as well as feel it.

"Yes, I am the head of the Unspeakables, and yes, I am going to carry out this sentence and do it without any feelings of regret." Remus didn't even stop for breath as he intoned, "Avada Kedavra."

He then lowered his wand as Daphne crumpled to the ground. "Sirius, can you confirm she's dead?"

Sirius waved his wand over Daphne and cast the spell he needed, a black cloud appearing above her body. "She's dead. What do you want to do with her body?"

"Take it somewhere and leave it where it will be found," Ron said, his voice full of anger. "I want Venant to know what's happened to his girlfriend. It's time that bastard had a taste of his own medicine."

As Sirius vanished with the body, Anna turned on Remus. "I told you Ron was too close to this and he should never have been allowed to act as a witness. It was unfair and you..."

"It doesn't exactly matter if I was fair or not – anyone in their right mind would have found that bitch guilty," Ron said, defending Remus' actions. "You saw Sirius' memories – Greengrass and Venant were laughing about Parvati and what Tom let his men do to her before he killed her. And I wouldn't have cared if Sirius had cut Greengrass into tiny pieces and dumped her body in a bag for Venant to find. As it was, she had an easy death, which is more than Parvati had."

He then stormed off.

Anna turned back to Remus. "You're supposed to be Ron's superior. Aren't you going to say anything about his insubordination?"

"No, I'm not," Remus said. "He's hurting and I don't blame him for wanting some satisfaction."

"This is why the Unspeakables and BritAD never got on – he should never have been allowed to act as a witness!" Anna snapped. "Your kind has always gotten away with murder, quite literally in some cases, and it makes for a slipshod organization."

"And your kind has always thought yourselves holier than thou," Remus snapped back and the minor feeling of dissension became a

huge rift. "So I'll tell you what, Commander Jameson, you run your little empire and I'll run mine. And in future, when you have a prisoner that needs executing you can dirty your own hands instead of running to me!"

Anna stormed off, following in Ron's footsteps, and Justin turned to Remus. "I've never seen her react like that before."

"It was bound to happen sooner or later," Remus said, well aware of the history of animosity between the two groups. "Although I have to be honest, she did seem unusually upset when she was viewing Sirius' memories."

"I wasn't exactly thrilled by them," Justin said, before asking, "Had you already seen them?"

"No," Remus said. "If I'd known I'd probably have left Ron out of it but on reflection it might have been a good thing. I know it can't have been easy for him to see the memories but it might give him closure. Perhaps now he'll move on."

"Is that a hint?" Harry interrupted, almost feeling as if this comment was aimed at him.

"No, Harry, it isn't," Remus quickly said. "Look, before you rush off, can I speak to you?"

"Is it about my position or Hermione?"

"Your position."

"Then yes, you can speak to me. We can use my study."

Once inside, Remus brought up the subject he'd only covered so far in a letter. "Given our current differences, I need to know if you're going to continue as Unspeakable."

"I am," Harry confirmed.

"In that case, we at least need to agree on a truce when we're together in the field or on official business."

"Ignotus will have my due respect, but when it comes to personal matters, please don't expect the same."

"Harry, I..."

"Don't try to justify what you did, Lupin," Harry said in a calm voice. "As you put it yourself when I first returned, you've lost the respect I once held for you and it's going to be a very long time before I consider trusting you again, if ever."

Remus accepted this. "Fair enough but why can't I tell what you're feeling, Harry?"

"Low level emotional suppressant – sorry, but I've displayed my wounded feelings too often without having them on display all of the time – it's nothing to do with you per se."

Remus knew without being able to detect it that Harry was lying; it had everything to do with him. "Very well, let's get back to business. I also need to talk to you about your status."

"I know from the revised code on my badge that you busted me down from your number one."

"I had to," Remus said with no hint of an apology. "You disappeared and I needed someone to take your place. And no, before you ask, it isn't Sirius. He has enough on his plate acting as Simon Blackwell and understands this. And no, I won't be telling you who it is."

"You've hardly got a great deal of choice," Harry said, using logic. "So I'd say that since he sat in on today's debacle, it's Justin."

Harry was right but Remus didn't tell him that; instead he told him of the progress he had made. "Harry, it could be anyone - I now have six Unspeakables under me, not including those people here."

Harry's face reflected his surprise as he exclaimed, "Six? But I thought everybody had died."

"I got lucky a few weeks ago. I saw someone who I knew from Phil's memories was an operative. Obviously I took the necessary precautions of making her swear an oath to check that it was really her and not some trick, and after I had done the same, she informed

me that she knew of five others that had survived by going to ground and so, thanks to Unspeakable Lighthouse, I've been bringing them back into the fold."

"A fold that I presume is no longer is going to have such close attachments to BritAD again."

"It's probably for the best to be truthful. Unspeakables have always operated in a very different way to Auror Division and so a parting of the ways was inevitable."

"So our collaborations are going to be on a need to know basis?"

"They are," Remus confirmed. "However, some operations we can't do alone. And I expect Jameson will take umbrage when I throw my weight around and demand her co-operation as I suspect I'm going to have to do."

"Will you still base yourself at Seashore?"

"Yes, but I'll get my command center moved to where the pub is now."

"That's going to piss a few people off."

"They can use the old children's playroom to drink in," Remus said, not really caring what people thought. "And so, I think I should get on if I'm going to annoy Anna by moving my HQ."

"Then I'll see you next weekend," Harry said, effectively ending their conversation.

Remus took the hint and left.

As he did, Harry headed into the cellar beneath his house and selected several bottles of wine and a couple of bottles of scotch to take back to Hogwarts with him. He knew that although she didn't agree with his drinking, Pansy would still provide the ear he needed as she had been doing since he'd returned to the school.

It had been she who had pointed out that if he still wanted to be an Unspeakable, he'd have to speak to Remus. However, it had been harder than Harry had expected, hence the alcohol. Deciding he had

better get back if he didn't want to try and explain why he'd missed a class, Harry vanished.

7th July 2000

Hogwarts

Hermione flew in through the window, bearing a message from Remus. "Hello?"

Hearing the sound of wings, Pansy came walking into the bedroom, a dry biscuit in her hand. "Hermione, this is a surprise."

Hermione changed into human form. "I know but Remus just wanted to let Harry know that he won't be there when you arrive back tomorrow. He and Justin are going to the US again to help Emily Bradford set up the new command post."

"I thought Anna was going."

"She was injured in a skirmish yesterday and has a concussion." Hermione noticed then that Pansy wasn't looking so good. "You look a bit pale. Are you okay?"

Pansy didn't answer, Hermione hurrying after her as Pansy barely made it to the bathroom.

When Pansy had finished being sick, Hermione took hold of her hands. "Pansy, do you want me to fetch Sirius?"

"No," Pansy said, gently pulling away to splash her hands and face and to swill out her mouth. "He knows."

"And he can't give you anything for it?"

"I'd rather not take anything unless I really have to."

Hermione began to feel alarmed. "What's wrong?"

Pansy knew that Hermione would find out sooner or later and so she said, "I'm pregnant."

Next Chapter: Hermione is forced to face her feelings for Harry; the task of undermining Tom's organization begins.

Chapter 69: The Weapons Inventor

Hermione's eyes widened in shock. "Pregnant?"

"Yes, about six weeks or so."

Suddenly the outside door opened and Harry's voice drifted in, "Pansy, are you up?"

"I'm in here."

Bearing a cup of coffee and a pile of papers, Harry did a double-take as he spotted Hermione with Pansy. "Hello, Hermione. What do you want?"

"I've a message for you from Remus," Hermione said, handing over the written version of the message she had just passed on verbally. "I was going to leave but Pansy wasn't feeling so well."

Pansy gave Harry a look that spoke volumes and he moved to stand by her.

Suddenly Hermione knew. "It's your baby, isn't it?"

Harry watched as the color drained from Hermione's face when he nodded. "Yes."

Pansy excused herself. "I should leave you two to talk."

"No!" Harry said firmly. "Anything I have to say to Hermione can be said in front of you."

"Not this time," Pansy said, kissing Harry's cheek. "I'll be in the bedroom."

Hermione felt sick at the concerned look Harry visited upon Pansy as she walked away. "I don't believe we have anything to say."

"I disagree," Harry said, grabbing Hermione's hand as she went to brush by him. "I can see you're upset. What I don't understand is why. You honestly didn't expect me to spend the entire time sitting and moping around because you'd moved on, did you?"

"No, but I never expected you to start dating Pansy either."

Hermione's angry tone caused Harry to be hit by the sudden desire to hurt his ex-girlfriend as much as she had hurt him. "Obviously I've been doing more than dating her, then again she didn't judge me quite as harshly as you did."

"What did you expect?" Hermione asked in a slightly elevated voice, Harry's barb hitting home. "You tried to kill me."

"You knew I wasn't myself..."

"And that was supposed to make me feel better? Well, it didn't," Hermione shouted, suddenly as angry with Harry as he was with her and she began to let it out. "But it wasn't that that was the worst. It was the fact you disappeared and left me hanging, Harry. I had no idea if you were alive or dead. Do you have any idea how awful that is? And to discover you were alive all that time and could have contacted me hurt all the more." In tears she glanced at the bedroom door. "Not that any of it matters now."

"I didn't sleep with Pansy to hurt you."

"It isn't that that hurts. It's the fact that you must have slept with her the moment you moved back into Hogwarts."

"I did," Harry admitted. "But it wasn't like that."

"So fairies came along and magically impregnated her?"

"Hermione, please try and understand..."

Harry's pleading just made Hermione even more upset. "Harry, ever since you came back do you have the vaguest notion as to how guilty I've felt about seeing Remus?" She took a breath intending to go on before Harry interrupted her.

"No, I don't have any notion, but you obviously didn't feel guilty enough," Harry said brusquely, his intention of explaining now gone. "If you had truly felt so bad about it, you'd never have turned up on my doorstep with him to tell me you'd moved on, just as I now have."

Hermione had never seen Harry look so coldly at her and it hurt. Unable to bear it any longer, she changed and flew out of the window.

Pansy heard Harry punching the wall and came out of the bedroom. "Are you okay?"

Harry wrung out his hand. "I'm fine but she makes so angry. She wanted me to feel bad because I slept with you, even though I know she must have slept with Remus."

"So you're not going to tell her the truth?"

"She doesn't deserve it. She just sees one side, hers."

"And it's going to be her side that everyone will see when she tells them about us."

"Ask me if I'm bothered," Harry barked out, before he took a deep breath and apologized. "Sorry, Pansy, you don't deserve to be dumped on by me any more than you deserved to be dragged into my shit."

"I'm as much to blame for this mess as you are. I agreed to join you in a drink and I should have remembered what happens on the rare occasions when I get drunk."

"You become more susceptible to idiots like me who want to lose themselves in a warm body and, even worse, who fumble the contraceptive charm."

"I should have known better than to drink like that," Pansy countered, and she tapped her stomach. "And I'm going to learn my lesson the hard way."

Harry placed a hand over Pansy's on top of her stomach. "Even so, you do know that I'm not going to let it slide about the wedding, don't you?"

"Harry, I..."

"Pansy, I've done the wrong thing too many times but not this time," Harry said firmly. "And it's the right thing to do, both for you and the baby."

"I know it's the right thing for the baby but I still don't want to marry you because of one stupid drunken night."

"You have to," Harry said, not willing to back down on this point. "This baby will be the Potter heir."

"Not if I don't marry you, it won't," Pansy said stubbornly.

"You'd rob him of his birthright?"

"No, but I don't want to get married because of a baby," Pansy said, tears starting to run down her cheeks as they were now apt to do at any time of the day.

"I know," Harry said, putting his arm around her and pulling her against his side. "And I'm sorry I fucked it up for you."

"I could have said no."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I have no idea," Pansy said. "Like you, I think I was too drunk to remember." She gave Harry a tremulous smile before bursting into fully fledged tears.

River Dene

When Remus arrived home early from a patrol that had been aborted, he discovered Hermione sitting on the sofa, also in fully fledged tears. He could tell that she hadn't expected him as she jumped in surprise at his entrance. "Hermione, what's wrong?"

"Harry is dating Pansy," she said as she blew her nose.

Although Hermione's distress was like a blow to him, Remus still commiserated with her. "I'm sorry. I know it must hurt."

"It does," Hermione admitted.

Remus swallowed hard, finding it suddenly difficult to breath. "I always knew that one day you'd want him back."

"I didn't say I wanted him back and it wouldn't matter if I did," she said, "Pansy's pregnant." She then started to cry again.

Remus moved over to her and took her in his arms. "It's going to be okay."

Hermione wept into his chest, taking comfort from his familiar scent. "I don't deserve you. You must hate me." She had no idea how much she sounded like Harry had done when he had been faced with her relationship with Remus.

And just as Luna had comforted Harry, Remus did the same with Hermione. "I could never hate you," Remus kissed her forehead, "although yes, I am upset that you're this hurt over Harry. I thought you were over him."

"So did I," Hermione said, clutching at his shirt. "Or I would never have started dating you."

"Are you still in love with him?" Remus asked, tilting Hermione's head up to look at him. "And please be honest with me even if you know it will hurt me."

"I don't know, I thought I was and then I didn't and..."

"Let's look at this from another angle," Remus suggested. "How do you feel about me?"

"I want to be with you."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes." But even as she said, Hermione wasn't sure she was being truthful.

"I don't think you do." Remus set Hermione away from him. "And so, as much as it pains me to say this, I think we should end this."

"But..."

"Hermione, admit you still have feelings for Harry."

Hermione gave a sob. "I thought I didn't but I don't know now." Suddenly she wanted to be anywhere but where Remus was. "I'll pack and move back into Seashore."

Remus caught Hermione's hand as she moved away from him. "You don't have to go back if you don't want to – I know how much you hate it there."

Hermione knew that most men wouldn't have been as understanding. "Thank you, but you know as well as I do that it's for the best."

After unpacking at Seashore, even though she knew that Remus had done the right thing by breaking up with her, on top of the news about Harry and Pansy it was too much for Hermione and she threw herself on the bed and wept.

July 12th 2000

Luna had rather more cheerful news as she burst in through the door of Potter Place in her white nurse's uniform. "Tonks?"

Tonks, who had become closer to Luna than either Hermione or Pansy now was, came rushing out at the urgent tone. "What is it?"

Luna held out her hand, showing off a big ruby inset ring. "I'm getting married!"

"Luna, you hardly know him," Tonks protested, even as she admired Luna's ring.

"I know that I love him," Luna said, flashing her ring off. "And we're getting married next month in a Muggle registry office."

"And does he know you're a witch?"

"Yes," Luna said brightly. "And he thinks it's wonderful, and once the war with Tom is over he's going to go hunting for Snorkacks with me and help me run the Quibbler."

"He doesn't know what the Quibbler is used for, does he?"

"No, but I want to tell him."

"Remus won't let you, you know that – Sirius barely got him to tell me that they were Unspeakables." Tonks had been let in on the secret on the condition she worked for Remus – her Metamorphmagus abilities being an asset that the Unspeakables looked for. Tonks had jumped at the chance, although she had told him she wanted to remain an Auror, something Remus had agreed with.

"I'm going to be married to him – it's different."

It wasn't – Remus refused pointblank to let Luna tell Richard, the oath she had sworn some time ago preventing her from telling anyone no matter how much she wanted to.

And then, to add to Luna's upset, Hermione refused to attend the wedding, unable to bear being that close to Harry and Pansy or to Remus, who also didn't attend in order that Harry would.

And so, Luna married Richard without two friends she loved in attendance and with one secret that she couldn't reveal to Richard.

7th October 2000

Sirius was thinking about his own secrets as he headed into the lobby of the Ministry – this was his new domain - for here resided the large medical bay that was now fully functional and under his command. He sighed as he realized how much he loved his job, but what blighted Sirius' pleasure was that, secretly, deep down, he also enjoyed the power that came with his new position... a power that had been handed to him by a man he hated. And it was a man who had just passed on some rather disturbing news.

After checking in on the medical bay, Sirius was walking back to the floo his mind on the news that Tom had imparted when he noticed a familiar face. As she threw floo powder into the fireplace, Sirius leapt in beside her, calling out, "Potter Place, Code Potter Black."

They were spat out unceremoniously at the other hand, both with wands drawn. Christabelle Carter looked at Sirius in dismay.

"What the hell are you playing at?"

"I might ask you the same," Sirius said, slowly rising to his feet, noticing Tonks, who was off-duty, and Neville and Julian moving into the room, all with their wands drawn. "I'd lower the wand. You're surrounded."

Christabelle looked around and judging she stood no chance, unaware that Julian's wand was a trainer wand only, she did as Sirius demanded. "What is going on?"

Sirius smirked as he removed his mask. "I should have thought that would have been obvious, Ms. Carter."

"It's Mrs. Carter," Christabelle corrected.

"So, Mrs. Carter, does your husband know you're fucking Snape?" Sirius asked bluntly as he checked her over for more wands and the like.

"My husband is dead."

"My apologies," Sirius said, although his tone was anything but consolatory, before he motioned towards the basement. "Down there."

After Sirius had alerted and briefed Remus about whom he had locked away, Remus questioned his friend's actions. "Why bring her here?"

Sirius shrugged. "She was just about floo out and it seemed like a good idea at the time. She's Snape's bed partner."

"And you hate Snape, I know, and like everyone else you want to take your revenge on him," Remus said. "But you know we can't just condemn her for sleeping with him without good cause."

"Fine," Sirius said, somewhat grumpily. "Let's play this by the book then, which I suppose means that we need to involve the She-Devil."

Remus grimaced – things between him and Anna had devolved into an almost unarmed warfare between them, Sirius siding with his friend. "Sadly, yes."

"I've also got some other news."

"It can wait. Let's get Snape's bed partner sorted first."

Interrogation Room 1, Seashore

Christabelle looked up as two cloaked men and a woman came into the room she was being held in. "Unspeakables I presume, and an Auror."

Remus sat down. "I'm Ignotus, my colleague is Noir, and this is Commander Jameson of BritAD."

Christabelle eyed Anna. "How did you manage to get promoted to such a prestigious position?"

"Because your master killed almost everyone else who ranked above me," Anna said, trying not to become angry at such a stupid question. "And I'll be asking the questions. How long have you been a Death Eater?"

"I'm not exactly a Death Eater, more of a concubine, darling," Christabelle said, her voice sickly sweet, "although I do bear the Dark Mark on my shoulder." She lowered her jacket to reveal it.

Remus looked from one woman to the other, easily able to detect that despite the fact they had supposedly only just met they were displaying animosity that was far deeper than it should have been. "You know each other, don't you?"

"Yes," Anna spat out reluctantly. "Sadly Tab's my sister."

"Poor Annabelle," Tab mocked. "It must really hurt to know that I turned out as badly as you expected."

"Don't lump me in with Dad," Anna barked, totally ignoring Remus.

"How is Daddy dearest?"

"I wouldn't know – I haven't spoken to him since you left."

This shut Tab up, although only for a short time and she soon found her voice again. "You stuck up for me?"

"Yes," Anna revealed. "Although I'm beginning to think that was a mistake, especially given what you've become. I saw you laughing with the other Death Eaters."

"What?"

Suddenly Remus understood why Anna had been so uptight after viewing Sirius' memories when they had condemned Greengrass. "She's talking about a dinner of the Inner Circle to which you were invited."

"I've been invited to more than one, so you'd have to be specific," Tab said, sounding almost bored.

"Why did I even think you might have been coerced?" Anna snapped. "I should have just trusted my instincts and not my heart."

"You made the right choice by trusting your heart," Tab said tiredly, her impassive front vanishing. "I didn't become a Death Eater by choice but given the option of joining Tom or going to Azkaban, strangely enough I chose Tom."

"And how did you become Severus Snape's lover?" Sirius asked.

Remus could feel disgust hitting him like a battering ram as Tab responded in a calm voice that belayed her inner feelings.

"He chose me to act as his partner for special occasions."

"Do you mean parties and the like?" Remus asked.

"Yes, but ask your friend Blackwell all about that – he's been to a few of them and should be able to tell you," Tab responded.

"But I'm asking you," Remus said firmly, before making a decision. "I think we should use our new derivative of Veritaserum on her – I'm not sure the old stock will work."

Anna was dubious about its success. "You really think it will be effective?"

"Let's find out," Remus said and he administered the drug. "Commander Jameson, please ask your sister about something which she'd normally lie."

Anna gave her sister an apologetic look. "Tab, I'm sorry to ask this but was your mother Voldemort's whore?"

Remus could see Tab struggling not to answer and fighting against the new derivative of Veritaserum that Hermione and Sirius had come up with together. "Answer the question and the pain will stop."

The pain soon became unbearable and Tab finally screamed out, "Yes!"

"She's telling the truth," Anna said, her voice full of guilt for asking her sister such a personal question.

The question had, however, brought up a whole new line of questioning and Remus stared at the blonde woman seated in front of him. "Your mother was Selena Gregory?"

"Yes, not that it's any of your business," Tab snapped. "And no, before you ask, I have no desire to follow in my mother's footsteps."

Sirius leapt on the opening. "And yet, you're fucking Snape."

"I told you, he chose me and not the other way around."

Anna could see how much this was distressing her sister, and although she was still wary of her, she decided to move the questioning on. "Are you loyal to Tom?"

"I'm not," Tab said, unable to lie under the truth drug. "And I'd like to know what's going on. Either this is some sort of trick to test me, because I know that Blackwell is on Tom's side, or Blackwell is a traitor and you three are what you seem."

"We are what we seem and you're correct in your assumption about Blackwell," Remus said, letting Tab know which side of the fence they were on. He then returned to the subject that Anna had veered

away from. "And now we've sorted that out, I'd like to know why you agreed to sleep with Snape when he asked you."

"Because he didn't give me much choice in the matter," Tab said, shaking as tears began to run down her cheeks. "He picked me out of a group of women and told me that if I didn't accompany him then I would join my comrades in Azkaban. I said yes, although I now wish I'd gone to Azkaban instead."

"Did he beat you?" Anna asked, her voice gentling towards her sister as she remembered the state of poor Tula.

"Sometimes he was rough with me," Tab responded, actually downplaying how bad it had sometimes been. "But he didn't use his hands – he prefers magic to inflict pain."

Remus could feel Tab's distress and so he now changed the subject to spare her much as Anna had. "Have you sworn an oath to Tom?"

"I can't answer that," Tab said, once again grateful for the change in subject. "And I'm sorry but I can't tell you anything important, not that I know anything."

Remus could see her shaking but every instinct told him that she was faking it, even though her answers were truthful. However, he decided to play along with her. "If that's true, then there really is nothing to be worried about. Commander, would you get her a glass of water?"

Tab took the glass of water that Anna passed her. "Sorry I was such a bitch to you but I was just horribly nervous that even though you're my sister, you'd still execute me or something like that, no matter what I'd done."

"Does this mean you've killed for Tom or Snape?" Remus asked, jumping to the obvious conclusion from her comment.

"No!"

Tab's answer was honest but again Remus felt as if she was holding something back. "What aren't you telling us?"

"I've been practicing the Dark Arts," Tab said softly. "I didn't want to but Snape insisted."

"Don't worry about that right now," Remus said and he moved the questioning on, recalling Pansy's comment after the dinner party about Tab's employment. "How you are employed at the Ministry?"

"I'm head of supplies," Tab said, her voice full of disgust. "Something your friend Blackwell could confirm."

"How?" Sirius asked, a little surprised as he didn't know what she was talking about.

"My signature is at the bottom of every order he sent in when setting up his medical unit."

Sirius hadn't noticed, barely ever glancing at the orders that came back approved to him, which in his situation, were all of them. He found himself wondering what Tab had done before Tom had come to power. "Is that what you did before Tom's takeover?"

"No."

"What did you do?" Sirius asked when Tab wasn't exactly forthcoming.

"I worked in the DOM."

Remus could feel Tab's reticence to discuss her previous job and so he pressed her when Sirius didn't. "Doing what?"

"I was head of cleaning."

Although Tab was being honest, Remus was suddenly convinced that something wasn't quite right with the woman he was facing and that there was more to her situation than she was telling him. "So you were a cleaner?"

"No, I was head of cleaning," Tab repeated.

"In the DOM?"

"Yes." Tab's tears began afresh. "Why are you asking me all of these questions about my job? I haven't done anything wrong."

"I didn't say you had."

"Then why ask?"

"Because I know you're not being entirely honest about your job."

"I was head of cleaning," Tab repeated again.

Suddenly something occurred to Remus and he handed over his Unspeakable's badge to Tab, and, surprising Sirius and Anna, also his wand. "Tap it."

Tab did so and Remus' I.D. indicated that he had unrestricted level one clearance. Anna and Sirius were even more taken aback when Tab straightened up and, in a firm voice belying her tearful visage, asked, "What about my sister and your friend here?"

Remus turned to Sirius. "Show her your I.D."

Sirius handed it over, indicating that, just like Remus, he also held unrestricted level one clearance. "Satisfied?"

"Not quite," Tab said, and she looked expectantly at Anna, who also handed over her badge, which had changed automatically to show her elevated rank. "And...?"

Remus shook his head as he took his wand back. "I believe you have something to say first, although I'm well aware that you won't be able to supply us with your I.D."

Tab nodded, her tears miraculously vanishing. "Code eight two two, operative code one Gamma one. Your turn, Unspeakable Ignotus."

While holding his wand to his I.D., Remus said softly, "Code four six nine, operative code one Alpha one." The badge glowed green before the radiance vanished.

Anna copied Remus. "Code nine seven three, operative code one Beta one."

Sirius now knew there was something definitely not quite right about Tab but he did as the others had. "Code six eleven eight, operative code two Alpha two."

Remus repeated his earlier question. "I'd now like to know what department you really headed up."

"I'm Chief Weapons Inventor Johanna Jameson," Tab revealed. "I headed up Creation and Production."

"So you lied about your name and your job," Sirius noted.

Tab shook her head, both in denial and to try to shake off the effects of the Veritaserum. "I skirted the truth about my job and used the title I'd been assigned to hide what I really did. And my middle name is actually Christabelle, but as Anna could tell you, I prefer to go by Tab and, after Tom's attack, to avoid any difficult questions I reverted back to my married name of Carter. So, as you might gather, I'm no more immune to Veritaserum than probably anyone else out there who isn't a Death Eater.

"You fooled me for a moment," Anna admitted. "And I know you."

"But not him," Tab nodded towards Remus. "You somehow knew I was evading the questions even though I couldn't exactly lie. Are you an empath?"

"Not many people believe in their existence," Remus said, well aware that Luna was probably the only other person he knew who did apart from himself.

"I've seen some strange things during my time," Tab answered. "So I've learned not take everything at face value, a little like you."

"Does Tom or Snape have any idea about the truth of your former position?"

Tab smiled, one of triumph. "Absolutely not. I wept buckets, swore I was head of cleaning and Snape simply believed me." Her smile faded. "Then again he wasn't exactly that interested in my job, more in what I could do for him."

Remus wasn't surprised, he had thought Tab extremely attractive the first time he'd met her and his opinion hadn't changed. "I'm sorry you had to go through that, and I'm sorry about what I'm about to ask you to do now."

"You want me to go back and spy on Snape?"

"Not exactly," Remus said as he handed over the antidote to the Veritaserum. "Before we go any further, I'll need an oath from you that you'll keep our secrets as dutifully as you keep Tom's."

Tab knocked back the contents of the tiny vial before swilling her mouth out with water and responding, "I'd be delighted to."

Once Tab had sworn an oath, Remus began to fill her in on exactly what he did want. "We do need you to go back. You're almost as well placed as Simon is and given that we're well aware that Azkaban is going to be filled with prisoners once again..."

Sirius coughed and interrupted. "Um, not yet it's not."

At the denial, Tab immediately knew who was behind Noir's hood. "You're Blackwell, aren't you?"

Sirius dropped his hood, deciding that he might as well be honest with Tab, or at least partially honest. "Yes, I am." He glanced at Remus. "This is the news I had for you. Tom has been held up with his plans for re-stocking Azkaban with all those who registered in his latest scheme who aren't half or pure blooded. Apparently it's breeding season for the Dementors."

Anna shuddered. "Those things breed?"

"Yes, and not even Tom has control over them when that happens," Sirius revealed, his face full of disgust. "It's put back his plans until it's over, although no-one is entirely certain when it will come to an end."

"How did he even know?" Anna asked.

"One of them split in two in front of a guard and sucked him dry, followed by a secondary attack," Sirius said. "I found out about it this morning during my visit to the Ministry. Tom is planning to feed them

by sending to Azkaban the poor souls who've wronged him in the hope of building up a bigger Dementor army."

"We have to do something about it," Remus immediately said.

Sirius shook his head. "Those things are currently free roaming on the Island and moving in packs according to Draco Malfoy. And Tom has quarantined the Island for the time being."

"Which would make it the perfect time to go," Anna argued.

Sirius disagreed. "If Tom's afraid to go on to the Island, then I would be too. It would be too dangerous and not worth risking lives in order to destroy an empty prison."

"I agree."

"So what was Malfoy doing on the Island? I thought Lucius was in charge there," Anna said after Remus had also agreed with her sister's and Sirius' assessment of the situation.

"Tom has just put him in charge of the prison in Daddy's place, and Lucius has become the ringleader in charge of rounding-up of the Muggle-borns in our society," Sirius said, his own disgust evident. "He's currently moved to the Ministry."

"Any chance of bringing Lucius in as you did me?" Tab asked.

"Not without a lucky chance like this one," Sirius said, well aware that Lucius was more careful than Tab had been. "But while he's there, there's always hope."

Tab asked a good question. "So if you can't move on Azkaban, how can I help you?"

Remus debated his options for a moment before saying, "Snape is at the top of our hit list along with Tom and the rest of the Inner Circle and I think we can add Draco to that list now. And although I know it will be just as difficult for you as it would be for Sirius in bringing in Malfoy, if you can bring Snape in, we'll be able to deal with him."

"You're going to execute him if I do, aren't you?"

"Probably," Remus said without a shred of embarrassment. "He certainly deserves it for what he did to those Muggle-borns."

"What do you mean?"

"We believe Snape is behind the potion that killed them during the Easter massacre," Anna told her sister.

Tab was horrified. "He's never mentioned it. I knew that they had died but not that he had been behind it."

"I'm quite sure it's good riddance to bad rubbish as far as he's concerned," Sirius snarled angrily. "And the students aren't obviously even worth a mention, not even to brag."

"I'm so sorry," Tab said, unable to miss the look of pain on Sirius' face. "Did you know any of them?"

"I did. I had to euthanize one of them," Sirius said, before naming the student in question. "Susan Bones, the former head of BritAD's niece."

"I really am sorry, and I'll do my best to bring Snape in so that he can pay for what he's done."

"Thank you," Anna said, smiling at her sister. "I have a few more questions for you. What..."

After a few final ends had been tied up, the group then disbanded and Remus led Tab out of the interrogation area. "The former Ignotus never mentioned you, although I should have been made aware of you. To be honest I thought that Agnes Delaware had headed up C&P."

"She did but she resigned after an argument with Ignotus. And given that he was executed and my elevation to head of C&P only occurred about two days before Tom's attack on the Ministry, I expect he didn't have much time to tell you about that change." Tab followed Remus into his office. "I was very sorry that he died."

"You knew him?"

"Yes, although not intimately." Tab smiled as Remus indicated she should sit down. "I met him when I helped to invent a small part of a press for Xenophilus Lovegood to enable his printer to produce copies more quickly; Ignotus said it was a personal favor to Mr. Lovegood."

"So your expertise isn't limited to weapons?"

"No, I've a degree in Muggle engineering and a wizarding degree in ballistics, much to Dad's chagrin, who wanted me to gain a business degree."

"I have to be honest and say I didn't even realize that a ballistics degree existed."

"It doesn't here in England; I had to take the degree in the US, where I got my Muggle engineering degree at the same time."

"Why didn't your father approve?"

"He wanted me to get married, have babies and take over his companies."

"Commander Jameson said he wasn't happy with her career choice either but she never mentioned you."

"That's because I've always agreed with Dad that becoming an Auror was too dangerous and Anna and I had our differences because of it. That's why I was surprised when she said she'd defended me when I left. I haven't spoken to or contacted either of them until today."

"Your sister also hasn't spoken to your father in some time either although she did let him know she was safe."

"Something I won't be doing, and I'd prefer a change in subject."

"In a moment," Remus said, wanting to remain on the subject of parents. "Your mother, she really was Selena Gregory?"

"Sadly yes, and no, before you even go there, I'm not Voldemort's kid. Dad had me tested."

"I'm sorry, I'll drop the subject and go back to that of Phil Lovegood. How well did you know him?"

Tab reddened. "I wasn't sleeping with him if that's what you're insinuating. I spoke to him several times during the development of his press part, enough to let me believe that he was a nice person."

"I wasn't asking because I believed you'd slept with him. I was asking because the press you helped with was an important tool for the Unspeakables; the Quibbler was used to get messages to agents in the field."

"No wonder Ignotus was happy to do Mr. Lovegood a favor."

"You might as well know that Ignotus was Phil Lovegood."

"I didn't suspect," Tab admitted, before staring hard at Remus' cloaked face. "Does this mean that you going to tell me who you are?"

Remus stood up and held out his arm. "Let's go back to my home."

Trusting the hooded man, Tab took his arm and let him disappear with her. She smiled as a house-elf popped into existence.

"Can I get you anything, Master Ignotus?"

"I can serve us, Macclesby."

Tab couldn't hide her surprise as Remus dropped his hood as the house-elf vanished. "No wonder you're gunning for Snape. He hates you."

"The feeling is entirely mutual," Remus said and he touched his fireplace. "I've keyed you into my wards, as I imagine we'll be spending a good deal of time together, hence my revelation as to who I am, although I don't afford this honesty to every recruitment I make."

"You're recruiting me?" Tab's shock was reflected in her voice and on her face.

"I hope so. Your abilities would, without doubt, be an asset to the Unspeakables, and if you agree to join my organization, I'm proposing that you help to rebuild some of the damaged equipment."

"I can do that, but who is going to run it?"

"Phil's daughter, Luna, who's currently training as a nurse, would be my first choice. She knew most of the equipment, having helped Phil out during her holidays."

"What about her training?"

"She'd continue with that." Remus looked expectantly at Tab. "So, are you in or do I have to obliviate you of the last few minutes of our conversation?"

"You don't, I'm in," Tab said, before glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. "But I'm afraid I have to be leaving now. Snape will get suspicious if I'm not back soon."

"Simon will cover for you," Remus said, again putting up his hood and holding out his arm. "Let's go."

11th November 2000

Sirius met up with Harry in Hogsmeade, having sent him an owl asking him to join him. "How's life in Hogwarts?"

"Boring," Harry said grumpily. "How's life in the upper echelons?"

"There's never a dull moment." Sirius then moved away from the public areas and brought up Pansy. "I hear from Genevieve that Pansy has finally agreed to marry you and that it's happening next weekend."

"Pansy and her mother have had a few screaming rows about it and in the end Pansy gave in," Harry revealed. "Genevieve hurriedly set the date and booked the hotel, so there's no getting out of it for Pansy."

"I'm surprised you sided with Genevieve."

"I want to do the right thing for the baby."

"And what about Hermione?" Even though he was far out of earshot of anyone, Sirius had taken the precaution of erecting a privacy bubble while he asked Harry this.

"What about her?"

"You still have feelings for her."

"Had feelings for her," Harry said firmly. "She's now a part of my past."

"You're going to have to talk to her sometime."

"Not right now though," Harry said, not quite ready to talk to his ex-girlfriend again. "And going back to the wedding, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Fire away."

"Will you be my best man?"

"Of course I will."

Harry then moved things on. "Wedding aside, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Telling Remus the truth about you."

"Not a chance."

"Harry, we're trying to bring Snape in and soon, and you know what that means."

"Then I'll think about it," Harry said begrudgingly. "But only if I'm allowed to be there when he's interviewed."

"Remus is heading up the whole thing, so if you're going to bargain, then you're going to have to tell him with what."

Harry sighed. "Fine. Set it up for the Wednesday after my wedding. Tom is covering my classes for the week."

"I know, he told me." Sirius looked down at his wristwatch as it beeped at him. "Sorry, but I have to get back to the medical bay. Cam is waiting for me to discuss the new interns."

Harry noted that Sirius had turned a nice shade of red as he mentioned Cam's name. "You like her, don't you?"

"Yes, but don't worry, I'm well aware that dating a dedicated Death Eater is out of the question, despite the fact that she's, well, a tidy package."

"Just be careful," Harry warned. "I don't want to see you hurt."

"I won't be hurt," Sirius said, hugging Harry. "And as much as I'd like to stay and talk, I have to go." He then dropped the bubble and vanished.

18th November 2000

Potter Place

Although his friends couldn't attend Harry's marriage, they were celebrating it nevertheless, and at the exact moment that Harry and Pansy were consummating the marriage, Tonks had changed her hand into a large fist and punched Ron on the nose for making a rather disgusting comment about it.

Although it hadn't really hurt, Ron stood holding his face. "What was that for?"

"There are children here, Red and so I suggest you find something else to do with your dirty mouth."

Ron waggled his eyebrows salaciously as he asked, "What would you rather I was doing with it?"

"Ooh!"

Ron ran when Tonks went after him.

Richard Hufflepuff laughed at the departing couple. "How long before they get together?"

Lucy pretended to consider her answer, having watched the couple dance around each other for some time now. "I'd say about a month."

Bill disagreed with his date. "They're going to end up in bed together tonight."

Lucy coughed politely. "Ears!"

Emsie proved she was listening with her next comment. "Mummy, is Tonks Ron's girlfriend?"

"She's going to be, sweetie."

Sophia sighed and flashed Justin a hopeful look. "I wish I had a boyfriend. Everyone else has got someone."

"Not everyone," Julian said, reminding his sister he was still single.

"You don't count."

The discussion between brother and sister devolved into a squabble and more than thirty minutes had gone by before anyone noticed that Ron and Tonks hadn't returned.

It was Justin who did. "Where are Ron and Tonks?"

"Are they having sex?" Sophia broke in, fluttering her eyelashes at Justin as she did.

Lucy stood up and placed a hand on Sophia's shoulder. "I think it's time we left before I embarrass my daughter by reprimanding her in front of everyone. Goodnight all."

Bill picked up Emsie and held out his hand to Julian. "I'll see you home."

Julian took his hand and the group vanished.

One by one all of the others followed suit until just Hermione and Remus remained, Remus deliberately delaying his departure until Neville had left Hermione's side after bidding her goodnight.

Hermione had intended to leave early but had ended up staying as she had fallen into a spirited conversation about politics with Neville, who had been the last person she had ever expected to be able to converse about such things. Now, however, she wished she had left sooner as Remus cornered her.

"I didn't think you'd come this evening."

"Pansy made a good case for me to attend."

"Was it the same speech she made to me about our group becoming fractured and the need to band together if we ever hope to defeat Tom?"

"Yes, it was."

"And now you feel you've done your duty and you're going to run away."

"I wouldn't know what to say if I stayed."

"We could make conversation about this evening," Remus suggested.

Still not knowing what to talk about, Hermione said, "You go first."

Remus did so by making a confession. "Okay then. I'm going to tell you that I felt horribly left out when you were talking to Neville."

"Why didn't you join in?"

"I didn't want to spoil your fun... you looked as though you were enjoying yourself and I knew things would become awkward if I interrupted."

"You don't think that Neville and I, that we...?"

Remus laughed at Hermione's somewhat panicked look. "I know you don't feel like that about Neville – I meant I just didn't want to interrupt you when you looked so happy."

"I'd have been happy if you'd joined in." She gave him a smile and also made a confession. "I miss the conversations we used to have when I was living at River Dene."

"As do I." Remus could see she was relaxing and he commented upon it. "And now we've got the really awkward part of our first time alone out of the way, and I can see you're feeling more at ease with me, how are you?"

"I'm doing really well."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Was it as bad as you'd thought it would be, celebrating Harry's marriage to Pansy?"

"It hurt a little but not as much as I expected." Hermione gave Remus a small smile. "In fact it was cathartic to be honest. I feel as though I can shut the door on that chapter of my life and truly move on."

"Have you met anyone else yet?"

Hermione thought this a strange question given the reason behind their break-up but she wondered if it was Remus' way of trying to tell her that he had. "No, have you?"

He had. "I'm actually sort of seeing Tab Carter."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up into her hairline. "You don't find it difficult, given her current thing with Snape and that you and Anna can't stand each other?"

"I try not to think about Snape, and I like Tab enough to overlook her family," Remus said, although deep down it did bother him about his and Anna's discord, given that Tab was trying to rebuild her fractured relationship with her sister. "And to be honest, we've only been on two dates so far."

"Only two dates?"

"I've barely been home in the last six weeks."

"I thought Macclesby looked far too happy today when he was serving dinner."

Given he had agreed to talk to Remus, Harry had agreed to Pansy's request that the house-elf make the celebration dinner. He had taken a little more convincing to invite Hermione to it, but Pansy had won out, using the same argument on her husband-to-be as she had on Remus and Hermione.

"He misses you and Pansy living with us. He enjoyed the extra work."

"I miss him as well although I suspect he still probably misses Lucy more than me or Pansy."

Remus laughed at the running joke they had constantly shared when Hermione had been staying at his home. "Perhaps but he still misses you." He looked down into her face. "Be honest, how is it at Seashore?"

Hermione grimaced. "Horrible. Anna Jameson's rules make it like living in a prison, or at least what I imagine a prison would be like. She has a curfew of ten every night."

"Have you thought about moving out?"

"Yes, but Justin's flat isn't appropriate and moving back in here is hardly going to happen, despite Pansy's desire to try and bring us all back together as a group."

"Then why don't you move back into one of my spare rooms?" Remus suggested, before hurriedly going on, not wanting for Hermione to read too much into his offer. "It's not as if I'm there that often."

Hermione hated Seashore with a vengeance but she was still hesitant with her response. "It wouldn't be too uncomfortable, given our history and that you're dating Tab now?"

"I wouldn't have offered if I thought that might be the case." Remus could tell that Hermione was still unsure. "Hermione, I'd like to think

that you're still my friend and my offer is as a friend, nothing more, and if at any point you want to change your mind, then you can always move out without any hard feelings."

Hermione felt more comfortable after Remus' declaration. "Then I'll think about it over the next few days."

"I'll let Macclesby know that you might be moving back in. I'm certain he'll be excited."

"I expect he will." As she picked up her wrap, Hermione gave Remus a half-smile. "I certainly didn't expect the evening to end this well."

"Nor did I," Remus said truthfully..

"Then I'll let you know my answer shortly," Hermione held out her hand.

Remus took Hermione's hand in his own, squeezing it rather than shaking it. "I'm glad that we've sorted things out between us."

Before Hermione could respond, a voice interrupted them.

"Sorry!"

Both Hermione and Remus pulled back their hands and turned around to see Harry standing in his robe, Remus having totally missed Harry's apparition, his concentration purely focused upon Hermione.

Harry looked from one to the other, surprised to have apparated in to see Remus holding Hermione's hand when Sirius had told him that Remus had started dating Tab. "Are you two reconciling?"

Hurriedly both Remus and Hermione responded at the same time, "No!"

They then smiled at each other, Hermione responding to Harry's question more fully. "I'm considering moving back in with Remus." Suddenly feeling flustered, she added, "As a houseguest."

"Macclesby misses her," Remus said, flashing Hermione a smile, which she responded to with an even brighter one.

"I'm glad to see you've made up," Harry said in a polite voice, his question answered. "Now if you'll both excuse me I need to get a cup of that tea that Macclesby found for Pansy. She's feeling a little queasy."

Hermione's smile faded somewhat and she turned to Remus. "I'll owl you."

As she vanished, Remus contemplated Harry, who had set off in the direction of his kitchen. He had thought for one moment that Harry had almost seemed upset at his and Hermione's news but Remus was unable to determine Harry's feelings, Harry still insisting on taking a low level suppressant for his emotions. Shaking his head, he vanished to give Macclesby the good news that Hermione might be re-joining them.

And in the kitchen, after hearing Remus leave, Harry threw the mug he'd just picked up at the wall, before shaking his head and saying, "No more. I'm done. No more." Then, after making a cup of tea, he disappeared to rejoin his wife.

Next Chapter: Harry reveals a secret of major importance; Snape and Harry hold an illuminating Q&A session.

Chapter 70: Confession

22nd November 2000

As promised Harry met up with Remus. "I suppose you're wondering why I wanted to see you when I'm supposed to be on my honeymoon."

"Given that we barely speak unless it's to do with work, then the answer is yes, I am."

Harry got straight to the point. "When are you planning to bring Snape in?"

"I don't know," Remus said, now believing that it was to do with work after all. "It all depends on when Tab can pull the same trick Sirius did, but I don't want her risking her life to do it."

"And if she can't do it without risking her life? What then?"

Remus didn't like the idea of simply leaving Tab to Severus' tender mercies. "I've told her that I'll find a way."

"I may have one."

Sirius came rushing into the study. "Sorry, I'm late, I had an emergency."

"I was just telling Remus that I might have a way of dealing with Snape without risking Tab's life."

"I don't see how," Remus said, having talked it through with Anna, Tab and Justin, and having come up with nothing viable.

Harry began to lay down what he wanted. "Before I tell you, you should know that I'd like to run Snape's interrogation."

After a moment's thought, Remus slowly nodded. "If you can find a foolproof way of safely reeling him in, then yes, of course, you can take lead, although I will also be there. You can definitely say that I'm not sure Anna will like it."

"I wasn't planning on including her."

Remus raised an eyebrow. "Exactly what were you planning?"

"Of scaring the living daylights out of the bastard, which is why I need you."

"Do you mean what I think you mean?"

"Yes, if you're game."

"I'd be breaking every rule in the book."

"Can you honestly tell me you haven't before?"

"No," Remus acknowledged, before glancing at Sirius, who was remaining strangely quiet. "I suppose you want in on this too."

Sirius had already agreed that he would let Harry take the lead in this discussion, but now he'd been asked, he put forth his own opinion. "Yes, and I imagine Neville might too."

"I don't know..."

"Think about what that bastard has done, Remus," Harry said, his face cold. "He murdered schoolchildren while you listened; he tortured you; he effectively killed Susan and he almost killed me."

"This isn't about us," Remus said.

Sirius disagreed and couldn't help but offer up his opinion yet again. "I think it is. Snivellus is scum, Remus, and he deserves what we're asking for. It's just a bite, it's not as if you're going to kill him."

"Do you have any idea what you're asking?" Remus asked quietly. "Given how much I hate Snape, for me to change and to be able to control the werewolf, even after taking Wolfsbane, would be a difficult task."

"Quite frankly I wouldn't care if you tore him to pieces," Harry said truthfully. "Can you honestly tell me he doesn't deserve it?"

"No, I can't," Remus said. "But executing someone under the letter of the law is one thing and tearing them apart for vengeance is another."

"We could include a calming potion in your Wolfsbane," Sirius said. "It wouldn't affect its efficacy."

"While I'm ready to let Harry lead an interrogation, I'm not sure I'm ready to take things outside of the law, and so despite your suggestion, the answer is no."

"Then I'm not willing to share my ideas," Harry said in a firm voice.

"You'd let Tab suffer?"

"If necessary."

"I don't believe you. No matter what you've gone through, you'd never do that to someone."

"You don't know what I've gone through to say that."

"Even so, no matter what you've done, I still don't believe you'd let an innocent person suffer when you didn't have to. That's just not you, Harry."

Harry's cold hard exterior vanished and he admitted defeat. "You're right, I wouldn't. But it's important for me to be there when Snape is brought in."

"I'd like to know why."

"Because I want to share a little secret with him about me."

Remus could hardly believe his ears. "You want to share something with Snape?"

"Yes, and it's also why I asked you to come here," Harry said, pouring all three of them drinks and handing them out.

"I won't say that I'm happy that you've more or less put me on the same level as Snape, but I'm also not going to labor the point,"

Remus said, before asking, "So what exactly is it that you want to share?"

Harry's hand and voice was shaking as he said, "It's about Voldemort."

"What about him?" Remus asked as he took a sip of the special blend of the firewhiskey that Harry continued to provide for him, even despite their differences.

"You need to know that he's not a problem," Sirius said, when Harry didn't respond straightaway, Harry's nerves overcoming him more than either of them had thought they would. "Harry dealt with him a long time ago."

Remus was shocked to hear that Harry had disposed of Voldemort and he guessed this was why he wanted to tell Snape, probably to gloat. "When did you do it?"

"About three days before I finally succumbed to the Dark Arts," Harry said, taking a seat in front of the fireplace so that his shaking legs wouldn't have to support him while he confessed. "I, um, escaped one afternoon from my supervision..."

"You had supervision?" Remus threw a questioning look over in Sirius' direction, hoping he was wrong about his suspicions.

Sirius winced at the questioning glance, before finally also confessing. "He had me. I pretty much knew where Harry was the whole time he was away."

The explosion the two men in the know had expected came swiftly, Remus rising to his feet, his cheeks flushing red with anger as he grabbed Sirius, yanking him out of his seat and shaking him roughly enough to tear his shirt. "You son of a bitch! You knew how worried I was when we couldn't find Harry anywhere, not even the hos..." Remus hesitated as he suddenly realized something. "Harry didn't go to the hospital to get his jaw healed – you did it!"

Sirius didn't even attempt to pull free as he said, "He did go to the hospital but I intercepted him and took him back to Justin's flat where I treated him and then gave him the day to think things over. When I returned the next evening I offered him the choice of coming

back here to Potter Place and letting you help him, or of finally giving in to what he wanted."

"As if he was ever going to choose withdrawal," Remus growled as he roughly threw Sirius away from him and onto the floor, and, with shaking legs to match Harry's, Remus stalked over to the other side of the room.

"Actually, at first I surprised Sirius by doing exactly that before I panicked and changed my mind – it's something I've had to live with the regret of doing every day of my life since then," Harry said as Sirius got to his feet.

"And yet you said you felt better in your own skin," Remus said, reminding Harry of his own words.

"I did and still do, but if I'm being honest with you, and I am being honest, I regret my decision because of what I ended up having to do."

"And that was?"

"I decided in my deluded state that I was invincible and that I could take Tom down singlehandedly," Harry said with a slight smile. "Obviously it's a good thing he wasn't at Laurifer Manor when I went calling otherwise I doubt very much I'd have ever resurfaced again."

Remus guessed this was where Harry had discovered Voldemort. "You might not have run into Tom, but I suspect you found Voldemort there, didn't you?"

"In a manner of speaking I did," Harry said, before explaining his statement. "I was walking by the library and I could feel something almost calling to me. I eventually tracked down the sensation to a book, a book I stole and took back to the flat I was staying in in Paris."

"You set him up?"

Sirius nodded. "Now I have access to Gringotts in my right as Simon Blackwell, it wasn't too hard to access the Black vaults."

Remus turned his back on Sirius to face Harry, his anger at his friend being fueled by the fact that Sirius had literally bankrolled Harry's escapade. "So am I right in thinking that Voldemort was in this book?"

"Yes, and I worked out by trial and error what the book was and I began writing to Voldemort – of course I didn't realize then that the darkness in him was calling out to the similar attribute it had found in me. This went on for a few days until I finally succumbed entirely to the Dark Side and Sirius discovered me writing in the book."

"It didn't take a genius to figure out what Harry was doing but when I withheld the book from him he went into a form of withdrawal, although I knew he was too far gone for it to be withdrawal from the Dark Arts." Sirius had been more than a little perplexed. "In the end I had to give him the book back – every time I tried to withdraw the book he went into shock. At the time I thought I was going to lose Harry to Voldemort."

"Why didn't you tell me when it was happening?"

"Harry said he'd kill you if you came within ten feet of him and, if I tried to contact you he'd disappear and I wouldn't see him again," Sirius said. "He made me swear an oath, and so I couldn't get in touch with you unless he said I could."

Remus was still unhappy about Sirius' failure to act, but wanting to discover what had happened, he continued to move things along. "So what did you do?"

"I went to Grimmauld Place and from there I could access the books in Black Manor via the book portal." The book portal allowed a user to extract a book from the Black Library in Northumberland without having to leave the London house. "It was there that I found a spell that would allow Harry to take in Voldemort instead of the other way around."

"You have Voldemort inside of you?"

Harry's voice was casual as he responded to Remus' horrified question. "No, he's not inside of me, he's part of me. I absorbed him."

Remus shook his head in disbelief, saying, "You say that as if it was easy, but I know it can't have been that simple."

"It wasn't," Harry admitted freely. "I almost went insane... in fact I tried to kill myself three times. If Sirius hadn't been there for me, I would have succeeded."

"So all the times you said you were with Tom..."

"I was with Harry for a lot of them, although not all. After three months, he was finally well enough for me to leave him alone."

"So why didn't you come back then?" Remus asked Harry.

"I intended to but ever since I succumbed to the Dark Arts I'd been having strange dreams."

"Strange dreams prevented you from coming back?"

Harry could hear the disbelief in Remus' voice. "Yes, but unless you've experienced them it's hard to explain."

"Try," Remus demanded, wanting a better explanation than simply 'strange dreams'.

"My dreams focused on four artifacts that would make a man immortal," Harry said, "and because the dreams seemed so, well, real to me, I went in search of these artifacts."

For the first time since Harry had begun his explanation, Remus felt a spark of anger not aimed at Sirius. "And you didn't think that telling us you were fine might have been of greater import than searching for some bloody artifacts you simply dreamt about?"

"I wanted to but these dreams they were so... so lifelike." Harry got up as he struggled for words to describe the vivacity of the dreams and their effect. "And my desire, no, my need to find these artifacts was more pressing than returning."

The spark grew into a flame. "I'm sure Hermione will be thrilled to hear that. She went through hell because of you."

"It's not as if she didn't find someone else to take my place in her bed," Harry snapped, annoyed at Remus' heated retort.

Harry's comment angered Remus all the more. "We only knew how we felt the night before you arrived back and so there was no taking anyone's place in bed."

The truthfulness of Remus' words took the wind out of Harry's sails somewhat. "You didn't sleep together?"

"No, Harry, we didn't," Remus said, before deciding to be totally honest with Harry. "In fact we didn't sleep together even after you arrived back. We were both right about not being able to build a relationship based on someone else's misery and that's why it failed. Are you satisfied now?"

"I didn't mean to pry," Harry said, reeling from what he'd just learnt.

"But you did and now you know," Remus said, able to see that Harry was shocked, although, as before, he couldn't feel any emotion of any kind coming from Harry at all, and he suspected Harry was still using the emotional suppressant. "And to be honest, I think we should revert back to our prior agreement of keeping matters between us on a non-personal level, at least as far as our love lives are concerned."

Harry shakily nodded. "I agree."

"Then let's return to the subject of these artifacts," Remus said, trying to get his temper back under control. "Exactly what are they?"

"A stone of great power, a spell, a map and a key," Harry said, just as glad as Remus to return to the topic. Forcing himself to concentrate on the matter at hand, Harry continued, "And it was the stone, a large ruby, I found first. No-one was more surprised than me when I discovered it existed and with Sirius' help, I bought it. And so next, because my curiosity was more than a little piqued, as was Sirius', we set off in search of the remaining three artifacts."

"I found the spell Harry is talking about in the Black Library," Sirius said, having used the book portal in Grimmauld Place once again. "And Harry then tracked down the map, a set of cartouches, known

as the Cassus Cartouches, to the Egyptian Museum's magical section in Cairo."

Remus scowled as he recalled a news headline. "Please tell me it wasn't you who stole them."

"We both did," Sirius said, somewhat sheepishly. "Their security was rather lax."

Remus knew that taking the two of them to task would be a waste of time and so he moved on. "And the last artifact..."

"It was being held in the Ministry of Magic," Sirius revealed. "Harry told me to look for a small round object that nobody knew what it did – just that it emitted a great deal of energy, just as the ruby does. It didn't take much to find something like that and so I took it and swapped it out."

"And where is this now?"

"In Sirius' vault with the ruby," Harry said. "The Cartouches though are hidden in the wine cellar here in Potter Place."

"I want to see them."

Harry led Remus downstairs and into the wine cellar before tapping the wall and stepping through the gap that appeared. "Only Sirius and I can get in here."

Remus walked towards the Cartouches that were in a glass case, his voice full of awe as he said, "These are supposed to be some of the oldest cartouches ever discovered."

"That's why they're in an airtight environment," Harry said, having taken great care with the Cartouches.

"What are you going to do with them?"

"I know how to use them – don't ask me how, I don't know myself," Harry said.

"Don't tell me, more of these strange dreams..."

"Yes, but they're so fragmented it's taken me a long time to figure things out."

"So why tell me now? I understand you telling me about Voldemort but not about the dreams. You could have simply said you weren't ready to come back."

Harry colored a little as he owned up to his reasons for revealing the dreams. "Pansy said she'd tell you herself if I didn't come clean."

"She knows?"

"It wouldn't have been fair to marry her without telling her the entire truth about me, so yes, I told her on the night before our wedding."

"At least you were honest with someone," Remus said in a tightly controlled voice, his earlier anger returning at Harry.

"You've got no right to lecture..."

"I've got every bloody right!" Remus interjected. "I was your guardian and scared out of my mind when I couldn't find you, just as Hermione was."

"But she..."

"Turned to me, I know," Remus finished for Harry. "But it was something that would never have happened if you'd damn well done the right thing and contacted us."

"You still shouldn't have made a move on her," Harry argued.

"Perhaps not, but I couldn't help how I felt nor am I going to apologize for it again, not now, Harry, not after learning you put these artifacts in front of your family and your friends. I just hope it was worth it."

Sirius opened his mouth to speak, only for Remus to hold up a hand. "Don't even try to defend his decision, Sirius. If anything, you're even more to blame for this than Harry is."

Harry shook his head when Sirius went to open his mouth yet again.

Looking down into the glass case the Cartouches were inside of, Remus pinched his nose, trying to control his anger. "So, now you've told me why you went after these, I'd like to know what you intend to do with them now you have them."

"He's going to keep them in storage."

"No, I'm not," Harry said, meeting Remus' eyes. "I'm going to use them."

"You've got to be joking."

"I'm not. Just think of the good I could do to make up for what Tom and Voldemort have done over the years."

"Or the damage," Remus countered.

"You always look on the bleak side," Harry argued.

"No, I try to look on the side of reason, something that seems to have deserted you. And given that you've got Voldemort living inside of you, I think it's his desires you're expressing and not your own."

"I absorbed him, not the other way around."

"It doesn't look like that to me at the moment."

"Because I don't want to die?"

"Yes, Harry, because you don't want to die." Remus gave Harry a gentle look and said softly, "Harry, we all have a time to die. No-one is supposed to live forever, not you, not me, not anyone, and particularly not Voldemort or whatever version of him lives inside of you."

"It isn't like that."

"I think it is... nobody should live forever; it's just fundamentally wrong."

"So you're telling me that you're not afraid of dying..."

"Of course I'm afraid of dying but not of the actual dying. I'm afraid of what I'm going to miss out on, of never having children or marrying, the pleasure of waking up to discover that it's rained and the sun has come out. But even so, I know that one day my time here will come to an end and others will witness what I can't, and that's how it supposed to be."

"Fine, I won't do it then," Harry said a little too quickly.

Remus called him on it. "Swear to me that you'll never use the artifacts to keep you alive."

Harry pulled out his wand before lowering it again. "I can't."

Remus therefore withdrew his own wand. "Then as much as it would grieve me to do it, I swear I'll destroy the Cartouches if you don't make the oath."

"And I'll never trust you again."

"I don't know that you ever will anyway, and better that than you use these."

Harry raised his wand, his face turning ugly at the thought he couldn't use the artifacts. "I could disarm you."

Remus moved into official mode. "And if I give you an order to stand down, Risus, what then?"

"Why don't you try it and see?"

As Remus raised his wand, Sirius moved in between the two men, suddenly afraid that things were going to turn ugly. "Harry, I think you should do as Remus is asking."

Harry stared at Sirius as if he'd betrayed him. "But you helped me to collect the artifacts!"

"I did it because I wanted them out of circulation... I never honestly thought you'd use them."

Harry flinched as Remus sharply tapped the glass of the Cartouches with his wand.

"The oath, Harry, or I swear I'll destroy them."

Harry called Remus' bluff. "I know you wouldn't do it to something so priceless."

Remus said a few words, throwing up a shield. "I suggest you stand back and shield yourself as well. Red..."

"Stop!" Harry yelled out. "Look, Remus, you can't destroy them. They..."

"...are a temptation, Harry, one I don't think you've got the strength to resist without help. Make the oath or I'm going to remove the temptation for you."

When Harry hesitated, Remus opened his mouth to again incant the Reducto spell, only for Harry to finally realize that Remus was being serious and as a result Harry placed his wand against his chest.

"I, Harry James Potter, swear on my life and my magic that I will not intentionally use the artifacts that I have collected in order to sustain my life past its natural end."

Remus lowered his wand. "Thank you." He looked at both men. "Now, is there anything else either of you wish to declare?"

Sirius nodded sheepishly. "Yes."

"What is it?" Remus asked, more than a little frustrated, having expected both of them to say no.

Sirius held out his arm, showing Remus a tattoo of a snake and a skull.

"I put it there – why are you showing me this?"

"It's not just your mark, underlying it is Voldemort's," Sirius confessed.

"But you swore you weren't a Death Eater."

"I wasn't," Sirius said, rolling down his sleeve. "Harry did it after he'd absorbed Voldemort."

"Why?"

"Because as you yourself told us, you eventually become immune to using an item to link yourself to Tom, and Sirius was afraid of losing our best connection to Tom, so I marked him."

"That was taking a chance, wasn't it?"

"It worked though. If I hadn't done it, we'd have lost that connection - the ring stopped working some time ago."

"Have you marked anybody else?"

"Good grief, no, of course not."

"Don't look so aggrieved – you can hardly blame me for asking."

"I suppose not," Harry said, before bringing up the very thing that had helped him to make his decision about telling Remus about his experiences with Voldemort. "But it's how I know we can get Tab safely out."

"You removed someone's Dark Mark?"

"Yes, a Death Eater that Sirius brought in."

Remus glared at Sirius. "And what happened to this Death Eater?"

"He's dead," Sirius said, showing no remorse for what he'd done.

"You had no right to kill him."

"He slaughtered an entire Muggle family and deserved to die. And since I'm an Unspeakable, I'd say that gives me every right."

"You can kill in self-defense or carry out an execution after a trial but not for the sake of an experiment!"

"An experiment that is going to save your girlfriend," Harry broke in. "Without it, we wouldn't even be having this discussion."

"Even so, do you really expect me to include you on this case after what you've both done?"

"You need me, and you'll never find a better way of bringing Snape down," Harry pointed out, well aware he had the upper hand.

And Remus was only too well aware of that. "Believe me if I could leave you out, I would."

"So does that mean you'll include us when you bring Snivellus in?" Sirius asked, wanting to be there as much as Harry.

"For Tab's sake I'll let you know when it's going to happen." Remus then scowled at both men. "And do you have anything else you might want to acknowledge?"

"No."

"Good. If you'll excuse me I need some time to think about things."

"Will you tell anyone?" Harry asked.

"Given the subject matter, I doubt that very much," Remus said, opening the door. "By the way, you're both suspended for two months."

Harry's mouth fell open. "But we are trying to help you with Tab."

"I haven't finished yet," Remus said, ignoring Harry's plea. "Sirius, you will pay a fine of two thousand Galleons and you're both demoted to Unspeakable Second Class."

"Don't you think you're going over the top?"

Remus didn't. "No, I don't, Harry, and during your suspensions I'd prefer it if you'd both keep out of my way!"

He then slammed the door behind him.

Harry dropped his head into his hands before looking up. "Well, that went worse than I expected it to."

"We knew it wouldn't go down well."

"Still, I didn't expect him to bust us down to Second Class."

"I don't even know what that means."

"It means nothing to be truthful," Harry said, having had the Unspeakable system drilled into him by Remus, "or at least it doesn't right now in a state of war. Normally we'd be off this case and demoted to being a messenger."

"Ouch."

"I know but given we're both in the thick of things, he can't exactly make that stick."

"Even so, he still managed to make me feel this small," Sirius said, showing Harry with his finger and thumb.

"I think that was the whole point," Harry said in a dry voice, as he opened the door that Remus had slammed behind him.

As Sirius gave a final glance to the Cartouches behind him, he asked, "Would you really have used the artifacts or were you simply trying to rile Remus because he took you to task?"

"A bit of both," Harry admitted. "But I didn't expect to feel such a pull towards them." Not wanting to think about how much of a pull he'd felt, he changed the subject. "Then again, I never expected to get suspended either, and don't say I told you so."

"Well, I did," Sirius reminded him. "And as much as I hate to say it, Remus was right. If you'd let me contact him before we went searching for the artifacts, you wouldn't be in this mess with Pansy now."

"I don't call being married to Pansy a mess and it's not as if it's going to be forever. She agrees with me that we should divorce once the baby is born."

"And what are you going to tell everyone else?"

"That it didn't work out, but that we're still friends," Harry said. "She'll move into the flat with the baby and I'll live here."

"It's still more heartache than you needed to go through."

"I can't change it now."

"I know." Sirius led the way out of the dungeons. "But I'd be prepared for fireworks if Remus does tell Hermione."

However, surprisingly Remus said nothing.

January 9th 2001

After several attempts to pin Severus down and failing, Tab eventually pinned him down to a time and place from where she could take him.

Entering the Green Man Pub, Severus was surprised to see his bed partner sitting at a table. He walked over to her. "What are you doing here?"

"I have a message from Simon. He wishes to see you. He's waiting for you at Laurifer Manor."

Severus was surprised his fellow Inner Circle member hadn't said anything earlier in the day. "Do you know why?"

Tab shrugged. "No, but he said if he missed you, I should tell you to return."

Believing that maybe it was something to do with Tom, Severus held out his arm. "Let's go then."

Tab took it and, as Severus prepared to disapparate, she softly whispered, "Aperio."

Severus' eyes widened as he felt a tug behind his navel and they vanished.

Black Lake Cottage

Sirius straightened up as the couple appeared. "Severus Snape, how good of you to join me."

Tab pulled away from Severus. "Everyone thinks we've apparated to Laurifer Manor, so we've bought ourselves some time."

Severus tried to disapparate but failed. "Christabelle, what is the meaning of this?"

"What do you think it is?" Sirius asked as he moved in front of Severus.

"You tell me," Severus demanded, withdrawing his wand.

"Don't be so hasty," Sirius said, and then he decided to toy with Severus. "On second thoughts, go right ahead."

Severus aimed his wand. "Reducto."

Sirius laughed as nothing happened. "Magic dampening field. It came into existence around you the moment Tab portkeyed in with you."

"So you're a coward who's afraid to face me," Severus snarled.

Two more men joined the group. "Coward? You poison innocent schoolchildren, and you dare to call Sirius a coward!"

Severus found himself facing off against Ron, and he ignored the reference to the deaths he had caused. "Black is the biggest coward I know."

Sirius tapped his ring. "I wouldn't say that."

Severus snorted as Sirius took on his Simon Blackwell persona before dropping it again. "You can't really expect me to believe you're Blackwell? You haven't got it in you to do what he's capable of doing."

"And that would be?" Harry stepped into the room.

"Potter, I might have known."

"That didn't answer my question."

"Blackwell is dedicated to our Master – he's more skilled in the Dark Arts than you will ever be and isn't afraid to use them unlike you, Black." Severus smirked. "Have you told your friends that you were once a Death Eater but like the coward you are, you renounced our Master when you were caught after giving up the Potters to him?"

"Sirius didn't give up my parents and, believe me, I know very well that he wasn't a Death Eater," Harry said. "And yes, he is Blackwell – I'm surprised Tom fell for it – Simon Blackwell/Sirius Black - both excellent duelers and both healers – more than just a coincidence."

"A coincidence you're using to try to throw me off balance."

"In my last chess game against Tom I beat him by making him castle and thus losing his queen."

"You're just plucking at straws," Severus said, although a faint doubt now began to set in.

"Okay then, at our last Inner Circle meeting you reported your findings on the Longevity Potion, and it wasn't going well – in fact you blew up three cauldrons."

"You can't be Blackwell," Severus countered. "I was there when he swore an oath to Tom."

"Maybe so, but I wasn't," Sirius said, and he held out a hand. "You remember my oldest friend, Remus, don't you? He was at the dinner party masquerading as Gareth Edwards and he swapped places with me that night."

"You and your half-breed cur really should write fairytales, Black."

Sirius pulled out his wand, smirking as Severus actually flinched. "Remus, disarm him and then drop the dampening field but keep your wand on him." Moments later Sirius swore to the truth of what they had all so far said.

Severus now felt a cold trickle of dread run down his spine, fear that Remus picked up on.

"You should be afraid, Snape. After everything you've done you're lucky I don't execute you right now but unlike you I play by the rules and so we're willing to hand you over to Tab's sister, Commander Jameson of BritAD, and she'll give you a fair trial."

It was now Tab's turn to gloat. "Or then again, maybe she won't. She's not very happy that you raped me, Snape, and she was even less happy about what you did to poor Charlie Weasley's fiancée. You really are a piece of shit, Snape."

Severus leapt across the room, his hand raised, only for Remus to move much faster, his arm snaking out to intercept the slap.

"If you don't sit down, I promise you I'll revoke your rights to a trial and let Tab kill you now."

Severus thought about ignoring Remus but he knew how strong he was and he suspected he was telling the truth about Tab. He sank down into a chair. "So why aren't I undergoing a trial right now? Is this some pathetic attempt to torment me?"

"If I wanted to torment you, Snivellus, I could find better ways to do it," Sirius said coldly.

Having seen Sirius' handiwork, Severus knew that only too well but he also knew something Sirius didn't. "I'm afraid you'll never get that chance, at least not with me."

"And why is that?" Sirius asked.

"You were ordered not to lift your wand to me, Black," Severus said. "Don't you remember what I did to you?"

Sirius recalled when he had tried to attack a silver-masked death eater who had accompanied Tom when he had first been captured and what Snape had done to him afterwards. "Bastard!"

"Now you've acknowledged it was me, it makes me somebody you can't ever touch."

"But I can," Ron's other companion said.

"Justin, no," Sirius said immediately. "He wouldn't play fair."

"I want..." Justin was interrupted.

"As the head of the Black family and your father, I forbid it," Sirius said in a stern voice.

Severus' mouth fell open at the implications behind Sirius' words. "You can't be serious."

Sirius had to resist the temptation to quip about his name but refrained from doing so. "I am. Justin is my son."

"But obviously not your heir," Severus sneered. "Regulus told us all that you wouldn't man up and that you'd rather let your heritage die."

"I'm a true Black," Justin said proudly. "You do know how an heir ring works, don't you?"

"Yes, why?"

Justin tapped his ring. "Toujours Pours Justin Daniel Sirius Black."

As the Black Family emblem appeared Sirius gloated and said in a self-satisfied voice, "So as you can see my heritage will continue, unlike yours, Snivellus."

Severus quickly put two and two together. "So you discovered a bastard of your father's or brother's and adopted him. I'm sure either one of them would be thrilled to learn that his progeny will be the one that sits on the Black throne."

"Maybe if Regulus was alive he would but he's not," Justin said gleefully as he identified his birth father. "And nothing of him remains in me anyway."

"I used the Abrogo Progenitor ritual when I adopted Justin – he's now as much as my son as if he'd been sired by me and not my brother."

"Bravo for you," Severus said before grinning slowly, aware of something else that Sirius wasn't, something that was going to rock Sirius' world. "But you should know that Regulus isn't dead."

Sirius slowly shook his head and laughed. "After the shit you just spouted about me giving up Lily and James, do you really think that I'd believe anything that comes out of your mouth, Snivellus?"

"How about if I was to swear an oath?"

"Do you honestly expect me to let you do that?"

"Then you'll never know for certain."

Remus interrupted the discourse. "Sirius..."

"No, you're wrong, Remus, he can't be telling the truth."

"There's only one way to find out."

"Do it," Sirius said.

Remus therefore dropped the dampening field as Sirius threw over one of his wands to Severus.

"You're going to die anyway, so what the hell if you die at your own hand? And don't think of trying anything, Justin is far quicker than you and so is Harry."

Severus had thought about it but given that he was outnumbered, he simply did as he had said he would. "I, Severus Tobias Snape, swear on my life and my magic that Regulus Black is still alive."

Expecting Severus to die, Sirius staggered backwards as the light dissipated leaving Severus still very much alive. "But he can't be... I saw his date of death."

"Yes, you did," Severus said, realizing he had achieved his goal of catching Sirius and everyone else off-balance. Changing his mind about not trying something, he turned his wand on Tab just as Remus uttered the passcode to dampen all magic in the room once more.

"Avada Kedavra."

Tab stood shaking, her face white as the spell fizzled out just inches from her face. "You've raised a wand to me for the last time, Snivellus. This time let's see how you like a taste of your own medicine."

"You can't use magic in here," Severus reminded her. "And it's not as if you can... oomph!"

Remus winced as his girlfriend delivered a mean roundhouse to Severus' face, the sound of his jaw cracking echoing through the room.

Sirius was stunned at what it meant. "You're a werewolf?"

"No, but my great-grandfather was," Tab said, before she looked down at Severus who was holding his face and shaking in pain. "If you had ever used your hands to hit me you'd have found out sooner but you prefer to torture your victims using magic and potions – you're a coward, Snivellus, and I just wish I could be the one to take away your worthless life."

Remus reinitiated the magical field. "Sirius, please heal him."

Sirius shook his head. "Not unless he agrees to tell me about Regulus."

"He can't speak," Remus pointed out.

"He can nod," Sirius said and he looked down at Severus. "I'll patch you up if you agree to tell me about Regulus – if you renege, I'll set Tab back on you, your trial be damned."

In agony, Severus nodded and Sirius aimed his wand at him, resetting his jaw. "Talk."

"Painkiller."

Sirius reluctantly fished in his pocket for one of his ever present vials of painkilling potion.

Tab shot Severus a look full of daggers. "Trusting, aren't you?"

"He's in agony and would rather trust Sirius than suffer," Harry said, having endured it himself. "Believe me I know."

Severus took the potion, hissing out his relief before he sneered at Harry, although it still hurt to do so. "You expect me to believe you went through this?"

"I broke his jaw when he tried to kill me," Remus said. "That should give you some pleasure but not as much as I'm going to get when I tell you why."

"But first I want to know about Reg," Sirius broke in.

"I want to go," Tab said in a shaking voice, suddenly wanting to be as far away from Severus as she could.

Remus understood. "Ron can escort you back to Seashore - he's on duty with tonight."

"Weasley's an Auror?"

Remus grinned. "No, he's an Unspeakable."

"Now I know you're lying – no-one in their right mind would make a useless idiot like Weasley an Unspeakable."

"I would," Remus said.

"You're trying to tell me you're Ignotus?" Severus muttered in disbelief, wincing at the pain that was still in his jaw.

"I'm afraid so," Remus said, before dropping a bombshell. "And when we find you guilty of mass murder, I'm going to be the one carrying out your execution and not the head of BritAD."

Severus was finding it harder and harder to believe what he was hearing, particularly as he was fairly certain that Remus hadn't got it in him to be a cold blooded executioner - he'd always been a fence sitter and Severus suspected he still was now. "I don't believe you."

"We'll see." Remus dismissed Ron, and Tab, and then he turned to Sirius. "He's all yours."

"Where is Regulus?"

"I can't tell you that."

Every question that Sirius asked, Severus said he couldn't answer.

Severus smirked. "Figured it out yet?"

"Bastard!"

Remus reached out and grabbed Sirius to stop him from attacking Severus. "Don't – he's not worth dying for if you break your oath. He won't be so smug when he's about to die at my hand."

"As I said, I don't believe, and I know you don't hold the authority to execute me," Severus said in a lofty voice, still not believing that Remus was Ignotus.

Remus pulled his ID and held it out, tapping it with his wand. "These can't be faked."

Severus tried to act nonchalantly. "So what if you're Ignotus? It's not as if I care."

"Then perhaps you might care about these," Harry said, and he turned and walked into the other room before returning with a basket. "Recognize them?"

Severus did. "Where did you get those?"

"That's my secret but I'll tell you what, I'll share a little secret with you: Your former Master's Horcruxes are almost gone, Snape."

"You're lying."

Harry checked the list off using his fingers. "You used the diary to bring Tom to life, so that is defunct..."

"How do you know about that?"

Harry had deliberately mentioned the diary, which was one of the few things missing from the basket. "I was going to let you go to your death wondering about that but then I'd miss out on the pleasure of

telling you that I not only know about Tom but that I also know all about Voldemort and what happened to him."

"You're lying."

"Lair of the White Worm..."

"That's impossible. You couldn't know about that."

"But I do and if you want to know how, this is how it's going to go. You will answer my question truthfully and I will do the same with one of yours."

Aware that every question and answer bought him more time, Severus agreed and, in doing so, he was about to open up a can of worms for which Harry was far from prepared.

Next Chapter: Harry gets a terrible shock; Snape discovers that Harry isn't as Lightsided as he imagined; the group successfully infiltrates Azkaban.

Chapter 71: Blood Red Walls

At Snape's agreement, Harry knew what Sirius would want to know and so he asked, "How did Regulus Black survive his encounter in the cavern? And don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about – if you know he's alive then I suspect you know how he did it."

"His house-elf saved him."

Harry looked to Remus, who nodded to signify Severus had answered honestly.

Harry therefore gave his own truthful response to Snape's earlier question. "I know where Voldemort was because I stole the book from Tom's library."

Sirius was unable to help himself and butted in with, "How did Kreacher save Reg?"

"I'm not answering your questions, just Potter's."

"Then that's my next question," Harry said.

"Kreacher used a ritual to move Regulus' soul into someone else's body because Regulus' body was failing." Severus then fell silent as he debated what he wanted to ask next. He wasn't going to ask about the diary - he surmised that if Harry knew about the book then Voldemort had probably told him about the diary. Instead he asked about his former master. "Where is Voldemort's essence now?"

"It no longer exists," Harry said, being as obtuse as Severus had been with his first answer. "My question again. Who is Regulus now?"

"I can't tell you." Severus had little choice with his next question if he wanted to discover what had happened to Voldemort. "What happened to the essence?"

"It went inside of someone." Harry fired back with his next question. "Is Regulus still a Death Eater?"

"I can't answer that."

"You just did," Sirius said. "He's obviously a Death Eater. If he wasn't, Snivellus would be able to tell you who Regulus now is, and so..."

"I do believe it's my turn," Severus interrupted. "Lord Voldemort took someone over?"

"No," Harry said. "Does Sirius know Regulus in his new guise?"

"No."

"He's lying," Remus said, making a swift deduction as a result of the lie, "which means Regulus is also probably a fairly high ranking Death Eater given his former status of having access to a Horcrux."

"You've forfeited your next question by lying," Harry told Severus. "So it's my turn again. Did Regulus take over a woman?"

"No." This time Severus was telling the truth, and at Remus' nod he put forth his next question. "If Voldemort went inside of someone and he didn't take them over, then that must mean they absorbed him. Who was it who absorbed him?"

"Me," Harry said, not able to wait any longer to reveal the truth. "I bet you didn't expect that, did you?"

"That was your question," Severus said. "And the answer is no, I didn't. I'll also say that I don't believe you about Voldemort."

"Hold out your arm," Harry demanded.

"No."

"Then I can't prove it right now," Harry lied, well aware he was likely going to prove it before the night was over. "But I will tell you that on the night my parents and brother died, you and Wormtail accompanied Voldemort."

"If you know that, then you'll know what I asked him for." Severus decided to use his question when Harry said nothing. "Do you know?"

"Yes," Harry said, before offering up what Severus was looking for. "You wanted Voldemort to spare my mother. What I don't understand is why..." Harry knew from Voldemort's memories that for some reason Snape had been obsessed with his mother, although once again, he didn't know why. "...She'd already made it clear she didn't want you."

"Is that going to be your question? Why I wanted him to spare Lily?"

Wanting something for himself, Harry nodded. "Yes."

"I asked him to spare her because I knew that without Potter in the picture she'd turn back to me again."

"Again?"

Remus explained when Harry glanced over at him. "It was common knowledge he had a thing for your mother when they were at school and they were friends for some time, actually until he called her a Mudblood." He smirked at Severus. "It must have eaten at you knowing that James got her instead of you."

Severus' smile was triumphant as he responded, "Yes, but at least I had the satisfaction of knowing that I had her first."

"Liar!" The word spewed from Sirius' mouth in denial of Severus' claim. "Lily dumped you when she was only fifteen."

"It doesn't mean we didn't have sex first," Severus said as he nodded towards Remus, who had gone still and not a little pale. "Look at him and tell me I'm lying, although once again I'm willing to swear an oath to the truth."

Not trusting Severus to try and pull a stunt again, a shell-shocked Harry decided to rely on Remus' senses instead. "Remus?"

"I'm sorry, Harry."

Severus smiled nastily. "I was her first, Potter."

"But not her last," Harry countered through gritted teeth.

"Even so, the truth hurts, doesn't it, Potter?" Severus said gleefully and he went on. "So try this on for size. Your father died at my hand, as did McGonagall, and then I killed Lestrage after framing her."

It was at that moment that Remus changed his mind about how that evening was going to go and he held up a hand as Harry moved forward. "No, I do believe this shot is mine." He bowed slightly to Sirius. "This is for you, for what this bastard must have put you through, and for our friend, James." He then dropped the dampening field and turned his wand on Severus. "Crucio."

Everyone watched as Severus screamed under the Cruciatus Curse, his back arching until it looked as though it would snap.

As Remus dropped the spell, Severus struggled up and gasped out, "I knew you didn't have it in you to kill me. A real man would have done so after learning that I killed his best friend."

"I have it in me to kill. I just don't want you to die yet, not until I get you alone."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll answer that for free," Remus said, and he then lied without batting an eyelid. "You see, I never planned for you to go to trial. Jameson has no idea you're here. And in case you need reminding, Snivellus, tonight's a full moon, and we both know what that means."

Severus turned to Justin, who was managing to hide his shock at what Remus had just insinuated. "You're supposed to be on the side of the Light. I'm well aware you won't let him kill me like that, even if he did have it in him."

"Even those on the side of the Light have to play dirty sometimes," Justin said, quickly following the change in direction that Remus had just instigated. "And just like Dad here, Remus has lots of experience of doing that."

"But not you."

"No, not me, but after what you've just revealed about what you did to my best friend's father, I can safely say that even if Remus

weren't willing to take you apart, I'd help Harry if he asked me to, even if it meant going over to the Dark Side too."

Harry squeezed Justin's arm and faced Snape. "So you see, Snape, no matter what, this is going to end badly for you and yes, I too will be exacting a little vengeance before I leave tonight."

"Despite what you've told me, Potter, I still don't believe you have Lord Voldemort in you," Severus countered, uncowed by Harry's words. "Your true nature would have emerged before now."

"It did, but it happened before I had even absorbed your former Master, as Remus will no doubt enjoy telling you."

Remus grinned. "Masquerading as Gareth Edwards and doing so much Dark Magic changed Harry beyond recognition."

"You're trying to tell me he's Edwards as well?"

Harry tapped his ring. "Just as Sirius is Blackwell, yes, I'm Edwards too. Unfortunately working for Tom and using so much Dark Magic had a deleterious effect on me. I became more than a little enamored by the Dark Arts and when he tried to put a stop to it, I turned on Remus when I believed he'd betrayed me."

Remus confirmed Harry's words. "It's how Harry knows how much pain you must be in. I broke his jaw to stop him from killing me."

"It still doesn't prove he has Lord Voldemort in him."

Harry pointed his wand at Severus. "Want to see some proof?" Harry didn't give Severus a chance to answer as Harry used a spell he knew Voldemort had created and then he stood by as Severus screamed while his skin peeled away, rotted to powder and then regrew.

As if he was hosting a tea party and not listening to a man scream in agony, Remus checked his watch and his words confirmed that he'd most definitely changed his mind about what they were going to do to Snape. "Harry, Sirius, Justin, as much as I'd like for you all to witness Snape's death, it's almost time for you to go."

Harry ended the spell, kneeling down in front of Severus, who had fallen to the floor and he ripped open Severus' sleeve and used some of Snape's words from earlier. "And just in case that wasn't proof enough for you, let's try this on size."

Severus began screaming again as Harry touched his wand to the Dark Mark on Severus' arm, manipulating it so that he suffered more agonizing pain. Then Harry got up, smiling as he said, "I bet you believe me now."

As Justin vanished, Sirius touched Harry's shoulder and he was smiling elatedly as he said, "You can play with Snivellus in the morning if Remus leaves anything behind."

Severus was suddenly very frightened, and he appealed to Harry. "You must know that I was faithful to Lord Voldemort."

"Not faithful enough," Harry countered. "You chose Tom over Voldemort – that's just as bad as betraying your master to someone else. You're a coward, Snape, and deserve everything you get."

Remus growled lightly in his throat as he handed over his wands to Sirius, not daring to keep them on him. "Harry, it's getting close."

Severus tried once more to appeal to Harry. "Lily wouldn't want you to do this."

Harry hesitated, but it wasn't for the reason Severus believed. "Probably not. But seeing as she showed such a piss poor lack of brains by letting you fuck her, I wouldn't be taking her wishes into consideration anyway." Harry could see he had shocked Severus. "Be good enough to pass on my condolences to her when you get to the other side."

Harry then vanished. Sirius and Justin were both waiting for him.

"Are you all right?"

Harry sat down, his legs shaking. "Not really. I enjoyed that far too much, Sirius. And I wanted to kill him for what he said about my mother, even though I know from Remus' face it has to be true."

"What has?" Pansy asked, sitting down next to her husband.

Sirius told her and Pansy squeezed Harry's hand. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"So am I."

"Did you find anything else out?" Pansy asked.

Harry looked to Sirius. "I'm going for a shower to wash off the stench of that bastard. You can tell her. She might be able to shed some light on Regulus."

"Regulus, as in your brother?"

"Snape swore he's still alive and we suspect he's a high ranking Death Eater," Justin said, before reaching out to take Sirius' hand. "Not that I care."

This was something that had worried Sirius, although he had been unable to say anything in front of Snape. "Thank you."

"So any ideas as to who he might be?" Harry asked, halting in his intention to leave and shower.

"Yes," Sirius said. "I'm pretty sure he's not Lucius, so that leaves only one other high ranking Death Eater."

Harry's eyebrows shot up into his hair. "You think he's Venant?"

"I don't know of anyone else it might be, and he is friends with Snape," Sirius said before letting out a long sigh.

Pansy brought up a stumbling block. "But wasn't he Remus' roommate? How could he fool him?"

"He's done it once before," Harry pointed out before opening the door. "I'll be back in a bit and we can thrash it out some more then."

Black Lake Cottage

Remus looked at his watch again. "I hope you're ready to die, Snivellus."

Severus rushed him with a knife that he had somehow managed to hide upon his person.

Remus simply waited until Severus was almost upon him, and then he flung out his arm, sending both Severus and the knife flying.

Severus slowly pulled himself up. "Why don't you just kill me?"

"You're not dying that easily," Remus said, picking up and then bending the knife out of shape so that the tip touched the handle. "As was pointed out earlier, I had to watch pupils die in agony around me in that cell you set up in Hogwarts, and I think it only fitting that you die in the same way: afraid, with no hope, slowly, and in pain."

"I still don't believe you'll do it," Severus said as he calmly sat down.

"But you're worried I might. I can smell your fear, Snape," Remus said. "Do you know how much the wolf in me is going to enjoy that fear? It will make toying with you so much more pleasurable."

Severus couldn't stop the trickle of fear that ran down his spine as Remus started to disrobe. "You won't do this. I know you must have taken Wolfsbane."

"I have," Remus told him, stretching his neck as a shooting pain went through it. "I want to remember every last moment of this."

Severus got up and backed away as Remus began to contort and change, before bolting for the next room. Only once he was inside of it did he realize that there were no doors to close; Remus would be able to follow him wherever he went.

Hearing an agonizing howl, he turned to discover the change had been completed and, in Remus' place there now stood a werewolf, panting as it tried to get over the agony of its recent change.

"I know you won't do it."

Remus growled and moved forward, taking satisfaction when a dark stain appeared on Snape's crotch. He then gave a yipping bark and Severus ran.

Potter Place

Harry yawned and stretched. "It's almost dawn. I suppose we had better go fetch Snape."

"I wonder if Snivellus crapped himself," Sirius mused, laughing.

Harry pulled a face. "That's disgusting, Sirius."

"Sorry," Sirius apologized, and then he grinned. "But you have to admit he looked terrified, didn't he?"

"I would be too," Harry said, a cold chill running down his spine. "But then again, a bastard like him did deserve it. I just hope that Remus wasn't too gentle with him."

"Do you think he simply bit him?" Justin asked.

"Probably," Sirius said. "But he'll no doubt have toyed with the bastard first."

"Unless of course he changed his mind," Harry said, his tone telling the other two that he really didn't care either way.

"Whatever way he went, Jameson is going to be furious with all of us," Sirius warned, although like Harry he didn't care what Remus might have done to Snape.

Harry grinned. "Maybe so, but as we're all Unspeakables she can't touch us, although she can deal with Snape."

"I just hope he gets to experience being a werewolf just once before Remus executes him," Justin said savagely.

"We can only hope." Sirius checked his watch. "Let's go get him to face his judge and jury."

"I need the bathroom," Justin said, yawning. "I'll meet you in the dungeons."

Harry and Sirius therefore disappeared together, Sirius dropping the wards from the country cottage from the outside. They then

apparated inside, and Sirius' stomach rolled over, from both the sight that met his eyes and the smell of blood and feces. "Remus?"

When no answer came back, both Sirius and Harry began to search the cottage. Sirius found Remus in the sitting room, lying naked in a pool of blood on the floor with a large carving knife buried deep in his chest. Pulling out his wand, Sirius immediately extracted the knife and used a spell to seal the wound. "Hold on, Remus. I've got you."

Holding onto Remus, Sirius disappeared out of the cottage and into the potions lab in the basement of Potter Place. Not stopping to cover Remus up, he grabbed several blood replenishing potions and began to feed them to his friend. Then he checked his friend over to make sure he had no other injuries.

Harry appeared beside him. "There wasn't a lot left of Snape."

"I don't give a fuck," Sirius snapped. "Help me lift him up."

Aware that Sirius wasn't thinking straight, Harry instead cast a spell and floated Remus onto the potions table. "Is he going to be all right?"

"He's lost a lot of blood and his vitals are extremely weak," Sirius said. "I have to go to the ward at Seashore. I need a drip and some fluids for him." Sirius placed a bubblehead charm over Remus' head, using a spell to push oxygen into him. "His lung is pierced."

"Shouldn't we get him into bed?" Harry asked.

"Just make him comfortable there," Sirius snapped and he vanished.

Upstairs Justin was getting worried that no-one had returned, and he apparated out to the cottage.

As Sirius had, he gagged on arrival. Searching the cottage he found no-one and guessed that Sirius must have returned home. Justin apparated directly into the basement. "What's happened?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "Sirius has gone to the hospital."

Sirius returned and began to set up Remus with a drip, talking as he did so. "I should have been there."

"What happened to him?" Justin asked worriedly.

"He had a knife in his chest," Sirius said, sliding the needle into Remus' vein, the technology having been taken from Muggles. "I have a feeling that Snape did it to him in werewolf form."

"Do you think that's why Snape is painting the walls instead of simply nursing a bite?" Harry asked.

"I imagine so," Sirius said, taping the drip into place. "I can move him now."

Remus came to the next day to see Sirius changing his IV bag and Hermione sleeping on the sofa in front of his fireplace. "What just happened?"

"We almost lost you, Remus," Sirius explained, casting a privacy spell so as to not disturb Hermione. "And I want to know from you what happened, or at least what you remember."

Remus gave a potted recount of what had happened in the Cottage. "I bided my time, let Snape wander from room to room, trying to find a way out. Then as the clock struck midnight I attacked him. I didn't realize however that we had forgotten to take the knives out of the kitchen. And although I'd already destroyed one knife that we must have missed on his person, Snape managed to get a kitchen knife and he stuck it in me as I bit him. After that I simply lost control at the smell of my blood, his fear and the taste of revenge. The wolf surfaced, and that's all I remember until I woke up here. How badly did I hurt him?"

"We don't know," Sirius said. "But I can tell you that the entire cottage will have to be repainted. I imagine that blood red walls aren't really Narcy's cup of tea."

"That bad?"

Sirius nodded. "There were body parts everywhere, Remus. You tore him apart."

"I should be bumping myself back down to Unspeakable Second Class for my actions," Remus said as he ran a hand over his face. "As it is, your demotion is rescinded." Remus had dropped the suspension after two weeks, needing Harry and Sirius, as Harry had pointed out, although he hadn't dropped the fine.

And it was this that Sirius brought up. "But not the fine?"

"No, not the fine," Remus confirmed. "A fine I should be levying on myself."

"You're the head of the Unspeakables and I don't think fines count for you, do they?"

"No, but I think they should. I tortured and murdered a prisoner, Sirius."

"I don't blame you. He told us he killed James," Sirius said. "Remus, the son of a bitch deserved everything you did to him. I just wish that for one night I could have been a werewolf and been there to share his death with you."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do," Sirius said fiercely.

Remus was conscious that his friend had no idea how awful it felt to be subject to the will of the beast inside of him but he understood how Sirius felt. "Well, I'm glad you weren't; as it is Jameson is going to be mightily pissed at me."

"Actually she wasn't as angry as we expected when we told her – she said that after what he did to Tula and Tab he deserved to die and you would have been the one to execute him anyway."

Sirius' comment brought up a problem that was worrying Remus. "She's got to get over her fear of taking a life if she's ever to make an effective commander. I'm not going to mop up after her forever."

Sirius caught an undertone of dislike. "You really don't like her, do you, even though you're dating her sister?"

"Not in the slightest and Tab is a totally different matter," Remus said as he pulled himself up a little higher in his bed. "But I'm not just picking on Jameson."

"You're talking about Justin, aren't you?" Justin had also refused to execute Severus when the subject had come up when they had been discussing the plan with Anna Jameson.

Remus nodded. "He too will have to learn to do what it takes if he wants to remain where he is."

"I think he knows that and he does want to remain where he is," Sirius said, having talked things over with Justin after the meeting. "And apart from the fact he's reluctant to carry out an execution, he's far more organized than Harry ever was. He's a good number one, Remus."

"He is, but Harry would be too," Remus said, defending his former charge. "Ever since he took up the Dark Arts, Harry is sometimes almost ruthlessly efficient and after what he did to Snape last night, I suspect he'd be capable of doing what had to be done."

Sirius had to admit that Remus was right. "You're right but even so, Justin deserves to be where he is and not Harry."

Remus detected a hint of fear. "Why are you afraid of Harry having so much power?"

"Why do you think? I know it was my fault it happened, but does it ever worry you that Harry might become another Voldemort?"

"You mean because you think he craves power like you do?"

"How did you know?"

"Sirius, you might not realize it but you go on about how much you enjoyed setting up the medical bay in the Ministry as well as how much you like being in charge," Remus said with a smile. "And I suspect you feel guilty because you enjoy it."

"Massively so," Sirius said, the guilt always eating away at him. "But it's not just that. I think Harry would have used those artifacts if you

hadn't taken away the temptation, although I didn't realize it when I helped him."

"Why would you have? You trusted Harry, and despite your reservations, I think you still do."

"You don't?"

"Honestly, no, not after what he told me about Voldemort and the artifacts, although I can't exactly throw stones after what I did to Snape."

"I guess we've all got a little something Dark inside of us."

"We do but we all possess the capability of pushing back down deep inside of us," Remus responded. "Or at least I think I do."

"Remus, it wasn't your fault. Let it lie."

Remus decided to do them both a favor and he changed the subject. "Have you heard anything else about Azkaban being put back into use yet?"

"No," Sirius said, shaking his head. "You think we should go ahead with our plan to try and destroy it once more?"

"Yes, before Tom gets around to using it for prisoners again in his campaign against Muggle-borns."

"Then I'll get planning."

Hearing a noise penetrate their privacy bubble, Sirius looked over his shoulder to see Hermione turn over and curl up. "She didn't get much sleep last night."

"I was surprised to see her here. I expected to see Tab to be honest."

"I think what you did to Snape disturbed her more than a little."

Remus had expected his girlfriend to understand, especially given her heritage. "So should I expect a 'Dear John' from her?"

Sirius shrugged. "I don't know. But if I'm being honest, apart from Macclesby, Hermione was the most worried about you, and she insisted on remaining here until you woke up. I think she might care about you more than you both realize."

"She's just my friend, Sirius." Remus yawned. "Sorry, but I'm exhausted."

"Then I'll let you get some sleep." Sirius got up, but not before throwing a quick glance at Hermione, who was still sleeping. He had the sinking feeling he was right about Hermione's feelings for his best friend, although Remus refused to see it.

The Next Day

Remus opened his eyes to discover Hermione sitting on the sofa, reading her gift to him for Christmas.

"Are you enjoying the book?"

Hermione looked at him guiltily. "Yes and I'm sorry, I should have told you I was reading it."

"I told you that you were welcome to read any of my books, even ones you've given to me," Remus said, helping himself to a glass of water.

"Can I help?"

"I'm okay," Remus said truthfully, as he plumped up his pillows. "In fact I'm feeling more than a little hungry."

"I'll go ask Macclesby to fix you up something."

Hermione bumped into Tab arriving as she was entering the kitchen. "Hi, Tab, Remus is awake. I'm about to ask Macclesby to make him something to eat."

"Could you ask him to make that food for two?" Tab asked. "I'm starving."

"Of course. Tell Remus I'll drop by later."

"I will."

When Hermione re-entered Remus' room later in the day, she knew him well enough to see that something was bothering him. "You look worried."

"I am."

"Can I help?"

Remus sighed before saying, "Something happened that night I attacked Snape."

"Sirius told me what happened," Hermione said, moving to sit on the edge of the bed when Remus patted it. "You really can't blame yourself."

"I'm not," Remus said, having had time to think over what had happened. "Snape did deserve it and he attacked me first, but it isn't about that. It's about Harry."

"Harry?" Sirius hadn't told Hermione about what Harry had done.

"He tortured Snape after I did."

"Why?"

"He discovered that Snape had slept with his mother and Snape was gloating about it."

"She wouldn't..." Hermione's voice dipped and faded away at the look on Remus' face. "Oh my God! What did Harry do to him?"

"He used a rather nasty spell that none of us has ever seen before."

"And that's bothering you?"

"Yes, but it's the source of the spell that is my biggest concern."

"I don't understand. Didn't Harry learn it from a book?"

"I wish it were that simple."

Hermione had never known Remus prevaricate for so long before. "Why don't you just tell me what's bothering you?"

"Because I suspect Harry would be unhappy if I did."

"He asked you to keep it a secret?"

"No, but..."

Hermione reached out and took Remus' scratched and still bruised hand. "If you need to talk, you know I'll listen, but maybe you might be better off talking to Sirius about this."

"Again, I wish it were that simple."

Hermione quickly began to put the pieces together. "Does this have something to do with when Harry was away?"

"Yes, in fact it's everything to do with when Harry was away."

When Remus said nothing, Hermione gently said, "Remus, you don't have to tell me the exact details. Perhaps if you just gave me a rough description it might help."

"Nothing but the whole truth would be self-explanatory, but it's not really my story to tell."

"Would you rather I spoke to Harry?"

"Yes and no."

Releasing his hand, Hermione got to her feet. "I'll be back shortly."

Hogwarts

Harry was a little surprised to see Hermione flying in through his window. "Is Remus okay?"

Hermione was glad to hear that Harry was once again concerned with Remus' wellbeing and she reassured Harry as to Remus' health once she'd reverted to human form. "He's fine, but he's fretting over you. He thinks I should know about what happened when you were away but he said it's your story to tell, not his."

"Did he tell you what I did to Snape?"

"He said you tortured him with a spell they didn't know but that you didn't learn the spell from a book."

"I didn't," Harry said. "I learnt it from Voldemort."

Hermione had been expecting him to say he'd learnt it from a fellow Death Eater or Tom, but certainly not Voldemort. "Voldemort?"

"Yes." Harry held out his hand. "Sit down." He then proceeded to tell a dumbfounded Hermione everything.

She was shaking and in tears by the time he'd finished. "You should have told me."

"Would you have forgiven me?"

"Yes," Hermione said without hesitation, her face troubled, "I would have."

"You really mean it, don't you?"

"Yes, Harry, I do."

Harry tentatively reached out and took Hermione's hand. "Hermione, will you forgive me now?"

Hermione squeezed Harry's hand. "Of course I will."

Bolstered by Hermione's forgiveness, Harry decided to reveal what he had kept hidden from everyone except for Justin and Sirius. "Hermione, I need to talk to you about Pansy."

Hermione immediately withdrew her hand. "Harry, I don't want to talk about your marriage."

Harry ignored her comment. "Hermione, I didn't marry Pansy because I loved her. I married her because I got her pregnant and it was the right thing to do."

"I wouldn't expect anything less of you."

"You don't get it," Harry said in frustration. "I only slept with Pansy because I was drunk."

"So you weren't dating her?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I wasn't. I only hinted that I was because you'd hurt me. In fact we've only had sex twice, the night I got her pregnant and the night of our marriage to ensure its validity."

Hermione closed her eyes before opening them again. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because once the baby comes, we're getting a divorce." Harry took hold of Hermione's hand again. "Hermione, I want you to give us a second chance."

Hermione's mouth opened, closed and opened again before she shook her head. "Harry, as much as I want to say yes, I don't think we can ever go back, although sometimes I wish we could."

Hermione's final words gave Harry hope. "Does that mean you still feel something for me?"

In the face of Harry's honesty, Hermione faced what she'd tried to deny to herself when she had been dating Remus. "Yes. I think a part of me will always love you but we're different people now, Harry."

Harry still wasn't ready to give up. "Will you at least consider it?"

"I don't know."

Harry had been there when Hermione had come rushing in after hearing the news about Remus. "Is it because of Remus? Do you still have feelings for him?"

"He's dating Tab."

"That didn't answer the question."

Hermione went red as she opened up to Harry. "It's strange. Remus asked me the same about you when I found about Pansy and the

baby. I told him I didn't know how I felt about him. I still don't, but I do know that he's off-limits because he's with someone else, as are you."

"But I'm getting divorced."

"But you still slept with Pansy, Harry, and I know you were upset but I'm not sure I can get past that... or that I want to."

Harry let go of Hermione's hand and rose to his feet. "So you're saying no."

Hermione stood up as well. "No, but I'm not saying yes either."

Harry knew he'd have to accept Hermione's decision. "Then I'll guess we'll have to wait and see how things turn out."

"I guess we will." Hermione suddenly felt awkward. "I suppose I'd better go."

"Before you do, can we at least agree to be friends again?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes, we can."

Harry wanted to hug her but he suspected it wouldn't be welcome despite their détente. "Then don't be a stranger."

"I won't." Hermione then took flight and headed back to Potter Place to rejoin Remus to update him on what Harry had shared with her.

Left behind, Harry went over their conversation in his head. In retrospect, their talk had seemed stilted and Hermione had definitely been uncomfortable. Despite her former relationship with Remus, Harry had never once heard such a stilted conversation between Remus and Hermione. Deciding to share his thoughts with Pansy, he headed into the bedroom where she was resting, closing the door behind him as he went in.

January 22nd 2001

As promised, Sirius made a few discreet enquiries about Azkaban and quickly discovered that a team of curse-breakers would be going into the prison to upgrade the warding ready for the new influx

of prisoners. He had subsequently managed to take one of the curse-breakers out, having Bill replace him after Remus gave permission for Harry to mark Bill. Bill then subtly managed to tweak the wards so that a site to site transfer could take place, but only if there was someone inside of the prison with a type of receiver modeled on a two way portkey.

Bill returned triumphant but he knew there was a sticking point. "I've altered the wards but you still need to find a way of introducing a portkey into the prison since I couldn't take one in with me due to the security checks."

"That will be my job," Harry said.

Justin immediately protested. "Harry, you're about to become a father. I think I should do it."

Harry disagreed just as quickly. "Not a chance."

Ron also joined in. "I'll go."

Hermione tried to stop the argument with her proposition. "We should do as Cordie suggested when you were all fighting to be the one to go into Hogsmeade after the Easter Massacre: draw straws, but this time you're going to include me as well."

"And me," Tonks said, although she was pale as she offered up herself.

Luna, who was sitting with Lucy, also offered herself up. "Count me in too."

"Absolutely not," Lucy said immediately, not wanting one of her limited medical team in the danger zone.

"I agree with Lucy," Remus said straightaway. "We need your nursing skills right now, Luna, and before you offer, Tab, the answer is also no. We need you here to finish working on the explosives we intend to use. However, Hermione and Tonks are both free to offer up their names."

Harry glared at Remus. "But they're girls."

"We're women actually," Tonks barked at Harry, more than a little offended by his dismissal of her sex. "And I'm an Auror."

Luna stood up. "Let's just end this argument now. I'll deal with the straws."

Remus counted the straws when Luna returned. "You can't include me as much as I want to offer to go. My condition rules me out." He suspected the other straws were for Anna Jameson and her second in command. "And Commander Jameson, you can't go either. You're in charge of BritAD, although Auror Jericho can offer herself if she wishes."

At Anna's nod, Edwina Jericho dipped her head. "Then I'm in."

Luna turned away and removed two straws before turning back around. "Pick away."

As with Hogsmeade, Justin pulled a long straw as did everyone else.

In the end it came down to Hermione and Harry.

Harry reached out and pulled a short straw, relief flooding him that Hermione wouldn't be the one to go. "It looks like it's going to be me after all."

"We still have the problem of hiding the portkey on you," Anna said.

"I could put it in my cloak."

"If your hood isn't up, and it won't be, it can be removed just like a normal cloak," Remus reminded him.

"So where do I hide it?"

It was Hermione who came up with a solution. "I once had a temporary cap on one of my teeth. Perhaps you could do the same."

"How am I going to get a dentist..." Harry broke off and laughed. "Your dad."

"I'm sure he'll help."

One long trip later and Lester did exactly that, affixing a false cap on one of Harry's teeth, a cap Harry was supposed to throw in a spot where twenty people or more could arrive without landing on someone.

Three weeks after his arrival back, they put the plan into operation.

7th March 2001

Harry felt terribly nervous as he headed for Magical Passport Control – Sirius had given him faked papers so that it would look as though he was fleeing the country.

"Papers."

Harry handed them over, sweat beading on his forehead, making his acting more plausible.

"You're Henry Gladback?"

"Yes."

"Wait here."

Harry did as Sirius had suggested to do and he began to sidle away. He gave a frightened yell as two Aurors from Tom's version of BritAD, the British League of Justice, took both of his arms. "What's happening?"

"You're under arrest for failing to register as a Muggle-born," one of them told him. "Let's go."

After a brief and very pointless trial, Harry found himself on his way to Azkaban, where, although he was thankfully allowed to keep his cloak, everything else he owned was removed from his person. He was then tossed into a cell with three other men, who looked as though they had been beaten and starved.

Harry had taken a few knocks on his way in but judging by the state of the inmates, he suspected that things were very much worse in here. Suddenly he heard a door clang and, well aware of what was going to happen from what Sirius had told him, he crouched up into a ball and sat on the floor to try to escape the effect of the

Dementors. He was thankful that Bill had tweaked the wards that stopped Animagus transformations, otherwise Harry suspected he'd be having a terrible time of it. His cellmates certainly were and he noticed that they were so lost in their misery they hadn't even noticed his change. Even so, Harry shivered as the Dementors passed and he was thankful he only had to endure it for three days.

Unfortunately for Harry the projected three days in Azkaban turned into over three weeks, Tom having delayed a maneuver Sirius had been relying on to make their assault on their prison. It was also unfortunate for Harry that two days after his arrest, Pansy went into labor, and Remus, who had taken Harry's place at Hogwarts, found himself acting as the happy father. And it was during this time that Pansy inadvertently let slip some information that she probably shouldn't have.

Hogwarts

Tom, who had made one of his impromptu visits to Hogwarts, was both surprised and annoyed to see Gareth walking by the Great Hall. "We missed you at dinner."

Remus recognized the threat beneath the soft words. "I received a note to say that Pansy was in labor. I left to be with her."

Tom softened immediately. "Congratulations, Gareth. I expect you're on your way to see Genevieve."

"I am."

"Then I'll let you go. No doubt Genevieve will wish to see her new grandson."

Genevieve answered her door, having just retired. "Tom isn't very happy with you."

"I left to be with Pansy – you have a grandson."

Genevieve, as Tom had, became all congeniality. "I have to see him."

"Tom expected you would."

Genevieve picked up her cloak and took Remus' arm, her inclusion in the Inner Circle allowing her to disapparate from inside Hogwarts.

On arriving at the flat, which she hated, Genevieve headed into the master bedroom as Remus excused himself to fetch Patrick. "Where is he then?"

Pansy would have thought that obvious but she pointed at the crib. "Will is in there."

"Will?" Genevieve asked as she scooped up her sleeping grandson.

"William Patrick Edwards," Pansy supplied, hoping that all of this mess would be cleared up before her son had to be told why he had two different names, his other one being William Justin Patrick Potter.

"You named him after your father?"

"When we have a girl we'll name her after you," Pansy lied.

Genevieve was somewhat mollified by this answer and cooed at the small bundle in her arm. "His hair is rather dark, isn't it?"

"Gareth's grandfather had black hair," Pansy informed her mother, and she smiled happily as her father came in. "Hi, Dad."

"How are you, baby?" Patrick hurried over to his daughter, having already been to see both Pansy and the baby. But just like Remus, he and Pansy knew that Genevieve would be far from happy if she discovered this.

The next visitor was a definite surprise and Remus was more than a little shocked to open the door to Tom, who, although he knew where Harry supposedly lived, as far as Remus was aware, he had never visited before. "Tom, I didn't expect to see you."

Tom walked in when Remus indicated he should do so. "I'm here to offer my congratulations to your wife and to tell you that you have the next week off – I'll take over your classes."

This was a relief for Remus, who had managed to avoid Greyback, who was currently at Hogwarts, as he didn't exactly know how long he could continue to do so.

Pansy was as surprised as Remus had been to see Tom but she played her part, yawning continually until Genevieve pushed everyone, including Tom, out of the room, to let her daughter recover. Then each of them left, until finally only Remus and Pansy remained behind.

Pansy gave Remus a sleepy half smile. "Do you want to sleep here tonight?"

Remus was well aware of how nervous Pansy was feeling. "Do you want me to sleep in here on the sofa or out in the sitting room?"

"In here."

After fixing them both a hot chocolate, Remus said down on the chair next to the bed. "Pansy, we need to talk."

"We do?"

"Yes," Remus said. "Hermione told me you're planning to divorce now that Will is born."

"Yes..." Pansy said, unsure of why Remus wanted to talk about that.

"I think you should hold off with the divorce for the time being. You saw how Tom and your mother reacted tonight. I don't imagine they'd feel too magnanimous towards Harry if he divorces you."

"We never considered that, but Harry has asked Hermione to give him a second chance and if I'm still married to him..."

"I know what he asked her, and she also told me she still has feelings for Harry, so even if you're still married to him, she will probably consider waiting."

"Harry's not so sure. He's afraid she'll go back to you."

Remus gave Pansy a look filled with confusion. "Me? But we're just friends."

"Oh, okay."

Remus' eyes narrowed at Pansy's odd acceptance of his comment. "You know something I don't, don't you?"

"Yes, but if you don't know, then I'm not going to discuss it."

Remus put two and two together. "Are you telling me that Hermione also has feelings for me?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

Pansy scowled. "I hate it that you can do it."

"Most people do," Remus acknowledged.

Pansy could see she had given Remus food for thought. "Please tell me you're not going to break his heart again."

"Not intentionally, but I can't help how I feel."

"Remus, please don't hurt Harry by making a move on Hermione while he's not here again."

"I promise I won't," Remus said as he took her mug away. "Now you need to get some sleep."

Pansy yawned widely. "You might be right."

When Remus returned to the bedroom, Pansy was already asleep, although Will was starting to grizzle. Scooping up the small baby, he took him into kitchen and began to prepare a bottle for him, Pansy having already decided not to breastfeed, which was common amongst purebloods.

As he fed the small baby, Remus found himself thinking about what Pansy had revealed. He, like Harry, was still in love with Hermione, but this time he decided he'd talk to Harry first and let him know how he felt before he tested the water with Hermione. Having decided that, he put the small baby over his shoulder and began to burp him,

smiling as he remembered doing the same for Harry as a baby. Then, after settling the baby back in the room with Pansy, Remus took out a book and sat down to keep watch on the pair.

31st March 2001

Justin stood nervously together with the first squad of Auror Division, Remus, Sirius, Bill and Ron. Remus had asked Neville to stay behind to take care of Pansy.

"I hate waiting."

"So do I," Sirius said to his son, his stomach doing somersaults.

Any further discourse was halted when Anna, who was checking the time, called for hush.

"Silence please. Two minutes."

Bill ignored her. "I hope this pans out."

"As do I," Sirius said.

Now their plan was about to come to fruition, Sirius having deliberately chosen a time when the guards were supposed to be changing, thereby taking them away from the cells.

He took a deep breath as Anna called out 'ten seconds'. Sirius' stomach was churning as the portkey kicked in. He then let out the breath as he realized he was back inside Azkaban – their plan had worked.

Next Chapter: Not everyone makes it out of Azkaban safely; Harry's use of Edwards' identity has serious repercussions for Pansy.

Chapter 72: Serious Repercussions

Nausea assailed Sirius as he realized where they were as they arrived at Azkaban. "We're right in the lower portion of Azkaban – there will be guards between us and the upper levels."

"He was supposed to drop the receiver outside of his cell," Anna grumbled.

"Prisoners are brought here to be taught a lesson," Sirius informed her. "And I therefore suspect Harry had little choice about where the receiver ended up. I think the guards beat him badly enough so that he lost the cap."

Justin winced. "What does this mean for us?"

"To be honest, I have no idea how we're going to get past the guards without losing some of our side as the incoming area is a bottleneck and we're on the wrong side of it."

"Then I'll try to take them down from the inside," Justin said, tapping his ring and assuming Harry's Gareth persona before dropping his hood.

Remus pointed out a flaw. "You don't have a Dark Mark. I'd better go in."

Justin rolled up his sleeve. "Risus and I already thought ahead."

"He swore he hadn't marked anyone else."

"He hadn't then," Sirius said, defending Harry. "But Amicus asked Risus to do this just in case of a problem."

"When you get back, you're all suspended for a month for hiding this," Remus said furiously. "And this time I won't be dropping it early."

"You can rebuke them later," Anna interrupted. "And neither of you are going in, one of my team will go."

"I'll do it, Ma'am," Edwina Jericho immediately offered.

Justin disagreed. "You don't have a Dark Mark."

"Then I'll go," Sirius said.

Remus rolled his eyes as it began to seem like a re-run of the discussions over Hogsmeade and acting as the carrier into Azkaban. "No, you won't. You're closest to Tom and we need you at Hogwarts. We don't really need Remus there."

"I'll take the invisibility cloak and go in with you, Ignotus," Ron offered.

Remus knew Ron wasn't a strong dueler, although he was very quick on his feet. "Thank you but I think Amicus and I had better take this one."

With the decision made, Justin crept up the stairs heading towards the first floor and luckily he encountered no-one. He felt like giggling nervously as, just like in the movies, his cohorts crept up the stairs behind him. As he reached the top, he asked Remus, "Do you hear anything, Sir?"

Remus cocked his head and listened. "There are eight, maybe nine guards out there, I think, there could even be more. I can't tell by their scents as there are too many overlapping ones in the area."

"That's all I need," Justin said, handing the invisibility cloak to Remus, who flipped it over his head and vanished. "Get ready to back me up."

Anna and Sirius moved to the top steps, one behind the other and they waited for Justin to disappear out of sight, only then moving to follow.

The guards on duty were rather surprised to see Gareth Edwards heading towards them. "You're Professor whatisname, aren't you?"

"Edwards," Justin said, providing the surname. "Tom's asked me to make a check tonight since he's out of the country."

"Password?"

Sirius had thankfully known it and provided it to him before they had left.

"Moratorium."

"Arm."

Justin swiftly passed security and said, "Let's start at the bottom and work our way up, shall we?"

The moment a guard turned to open the door, Justin struck. "Reducto."

He span around just as Remus took out two more of the guards, one with magic, and the other with his now favorite fist in the face trick.

As they faced off against the remaining seven guards, a black dog leapt over the counter and into the fray, changing as he landed, taking a guard down with him. "Nebulosus."

Remus now had a distinct advantage and he wished they'd thought of using the spell sooner, although he knew that if the guards had seen a strange fog coming out of nowhere they would have sounded the alarm, something he was still afraid they'd do even now.

Ducking under a Killing Curse, Remus holstered his wand and used his speed and strength to take out his opponents in the tight space.

Justin and Sirius, who were both fighting in the dark and picking off targets when the fog dispelled every time one of the guards tried to dismiss it, could both hear loud crunches, screams and definite sounds of bones breaking.

"Drop the spell," Remus said, before yelling behind him, "I need a clean-up team."

Justin dropped the spell as Anna and two of her men came around the corner to discover that all of the guards were lying on the floor, not one of them without an injury of some sort and all were bleeding.

Remus could see how shocked they were. "Don't bother giving them first aid here – just portkey them out – the less of a trail we leave, the better."

"Ritus' secret Hogwarts' identity might be safe yet," Sirius said to Justin as they rejoined forces with the others and moved forward through the prison.

"We'll see," Justin said. "What can we expect next?"

"Not much – this is where they keep the Dementors."

Everyone was affected as they moved through the corridor, on either side of which, behind solid steel doors, were the Dementors.

Sirius visibly shivered. "I hate those bastard things."

Remus opened a door to discover yet another corridor lined the same way. "How many of them are there?"

"Too many since they had their breeding season," Sirius said, his shaking becoming more pronounced.

Ron moved forward and slipped his arm around Sirius' waist. "Let me give you a hand."

Two more corridors reduced Sirius to more or less being carried by Ron; Bill and Justin providing a similar service for Remus who, just as he had when he had tried rescuing Sirius, was nearly fainting.

The effect though began to wear off as soon they cleared the next door. Unfortunately they met resistance and at first Remus and Sirius were in no condition to help and it was here they suffered their first loss, Edwina Jericho pushing Anna out of the way of a Killing Curse and taking it herself.

The guard who'd cast the deadly spell found himself facing three similar spells and he died before he could savor his own kill.

Anna, however, was frozen to the spot, staring down in dismay at the body of her colleague. "She died for me. Oh Merlin, she died for me."

"Slap her," Remus said, not daring to do it himself as he swallowed the last of the chocolate he had popped into his mouth as he got to his feet.

One of the other female Aurors did as Remus asked, her hesitation evident in her questioning, "Ma'am?"

Anna shook herself, touching her cheek. "Sorry."

"Let's go," Remus ordered, after dropping a portkey on to Edwina's body.

"What next?" Anna asked shakily as she tried to rally.

"The cells," Sirius said in a grim voice. "The guards' offices are at the far end and they're probably making the duty change about now so we'll be facing double the guards in a very small space."

"Then it's going to be a bloodbath," Anna said grimly.

"I'm going in again," Justin said. "I may be able to do something to help change that."

"Then I'm going in with you," Remus said, once again employing Harry's invisibility cloak.

As he had been on the lower level, Justin was quizzed and identified, before being allowed access to the floor. Both he and Remus were disgusted by the state of the prisoners, and they were more than a little concerned about Harry.

They had good reason to be. Justin stopped outside of the first cell that was housing six prisoners, his eyes filling with tears at the state of the men who were wearing what could only be described as rags and had bruises, spell damage and cuts littering their bodies.

The guards who had accompanied him had something to say about the men. "These are the troublemakers."

It was then that Justin had an idea that might save them some time and get rid of some of the guards. "I want to interrogate them. Unlock the door."

Justin just hoped that the others would be able to take out the escort guards as they left without sending up the alarm or hurting the prisoners in the cross-fire. "I want all of them escorted down to the

lower chambers." He then moved on, the next cell containing four young women. "And these?"

"Not much better."

"Line them up then, somewhere private," Justin said in a casual voice. "It's been a while since I've had a little fun, if you catch my drift."

This time the guard gave a different order to four of his men, a smirk on his face. "Take them down to the sluice and clean them up. Professor Edwards fancies a piece of them."

Justin had to take a deep breath to try and remain calm as a guard openly fondled one of the women's breasts as he manhandled her out of the cell.

The last of the women had just been led out of the door that led to the cells when a cry went up and Justin knew that something must have gone wrong. "What's going on?"

"I have no idea, Professor," the guard said, pulling his wand. "I'll go check."

"You can unlock the door to this cell first."

"It's not protocol."

Justin pulled his wand. "Unlock the door or I'll kill you where you stand."

From inside of the cell, Harry tiredly got to his feet, withdrawing his own wand from deep inside of his cloak pocket, startling those in the cell with him. "Do as he says."

The guard did it but yelled out a warning as the cell door swung open, and as others ran to join him, Harry silenced him for his troubles.

Remus remained beneath the invisibility cloak, slipping past the guards who had now moved to take on Justin, before uncloaking and attacking from behind, catching more than three of them off-

guard. Justin had dispatched three on his own but there were still close to twenty remaining.

Stepping out of his cell, as he heard the beginning incantation of Justin's next spell Harry's eyes widened in shock that his best friend was using such a Dark spell and he screamed at Remus, "Reflective Shield!"

Remus, as well as two of the guards, did as Harry ordered. And, as what looked like molten lava erupted from Justin's wand, spraying most of the guards in their path, Remus was glad he had reacted rather than thinking. Even so, he thought he was going to be sick as the stench of burning flesh met his nostrils moments later, and then, as agonizing pain set in, Remus realized that he hadn't been quite quick enough and that it was his own flesh burning, making him scream out in agony as his brain caught up with his nerve endings.

Keeping calm, Harry called out the incantation for a temporary dressing, aiming the spell at Remus, while at the same time Justin sent a spell at one of the remaining guards who was lying on the floor and reaching for his wand. However, his partner managed to get a spell in before Harry took him out, the spell whistling through the air towards Remus, who, now shaky after the burn Justin had inflicted on him, couldn't get out of the way in time.

Harry turned as Remus fell and his hair flared up, which was never a good sign. "Not clever, not fucking clever at all. Eviscum."

Justin turned away and threw up at the sight of the man's entrails spilling out. Harry followed this with several decapitation spells and a flaying spell, removing the last of the opposition against them.

By now the walls of the prison were actually shaking, Harry's fury at what the guard had done to Remus intensifying his magic, and, afraid that Harry was going to bring the prison down on top of them, Sirius, who had just managed to reach them after fighting his way through, grabbed Harry's arm. "Harry, you need to calm down."

At that moment Remus opened his eyes and groaned, "I'm okay."

Justin also tried to reassure his friend. "Harry, Remus is going to be fine. And right now we have to help the prisoners."

Harry forced himself to take several deep breaths, his hair settling down just as Bill came running up behind them, blood pouring from a cut above his eye. "What do you need me to do?"

"We won't be able to unlock the doors quickly enough without the guards' passcodes, so use the sticks of dinky-dynamite that Tab gave you to blow the doors, and then hand out the portkeys," Sirius said quickly, aiming his wand at Bill's cut to seal it. "How's it going back there?"

"We're holding our own," Bill said as he limped quickly up the corridor. "But we've been unable to lay explosives yet because of all the fighting. They've brought in reinforcements from somewhere."

"The guardhouse behind the prison," Sirius said, reminding Bill of what he had told them before the incursion. "Someone must have sent up the alarm, which means I suspect we won't have much time before Tom or Venant shows up." It was then that Sirius noticed Remus' hand, the temporary dressing not quite covering all the damage. "Merlin, that looks bad."

Remus gave him a pained smile. "I'll be okay."

"I beg to differ."

As Sirius cast a healing spell on the burn, Bill gave a warning cry. "The wards are being collapsed."

As Bill's cry echoed up the corridor, Sirius shared a worried glance with Remus. "We're going to be stuck inside this prison if we don't get out now."

"But we can't leave them," Justin said, his arm flailing towards the cells that still contained prisoners.

"And what about the high security prisoners?" Harry asked in concern.

"I don't think we're going to have enough time to help them as well," Sirius said.

"I agree and I'll do what I can to hold up the wards in here, so you should focus on this floor for the moment," Bill said, aiming his wand

into the air as he ran down the corridor. "And you're going to have to work fast."

Leaving Remus sitting on the floor, Justin ran towards the other end of the corridor with Harry, Sirius taking the cells closest to Bill.

Justin was just handing out the last portkey in his possession, his own, when Bill screamed, "I can't hold them for much longer!"

"Get out then!" Remus yelled from his place on the floor.

"If I do, I'll lose all four of you. All of you, run towards me!" Bill yelled back as he fought to hold the wards in place as he slowly began to edge forwards, desperately fighting to hold the collapse of the wards at bay.

Sirius reached Bill within moments but far behind him, Harry felt as if he was moving through treacle as he began to run towards where Bill had now stopped, unable to move for fear of losing concentration and the wards. As he ran down the long, dank corridor, despite Bill's best efforts, Harry could feel the wards closing in on him, almost like a noose around his neck.

Justin too was running, his arm looped around Remus' waist, and although Remus was doing his best to hobble along, Justin knew they weren't going to make it.

Behind them, Harry was well aware that he too wouldn't make out it. However, he hoped to save his friends from the same fate and he quickly called out a blasting charm, pushing every bit of power he possessed into it.

Sirius meanwhile was doing something similar. "Accio Unspeakables."

Just as the spells simultaneously flew towards their targets, a prison guard they'd believed dead, reached up and grabbed Remus' leg, sending him and Justin flying, causing the spells to miss them entirely.

As the spells flew by each other over Remus' and Justin's heads, Bill was hit by Harry's blasting spell, sending him hurtling towards the wall behind him, and Sirius' summoning spell hit Harry, Harry

shooting forward towards and through the wards just as they snapped closed. He screamed with pain as his arm snapped as he ricocheted against a wall, the shutting down of the wards throwing him sideways.

As Bill also flew through the air, Sirius aimed his wand again, changing his tactics as he didn't want to see the head of the Weasley family splattered against the wall.

"Arresto Momentum."

Next to him, Anna and Ron had also cast cushioning spells at the same time. Even so, the impact was still enough to knock Bill out cold.

Ignoring Harry's pain, Sirius knelt down and tried to revive Bill. "Damn, I need him to bring our wards back up and take Tom's back down. If we don't, Tom and his men will be able to get in."

Watching one of her junior Aurors, who Bill was training, struggling to hold up the wards on the other side of them, Anna yelled at Sirius, "The second set is also collapsing. We have to go."

Justin flicked the invisible wall that now held him inside of Azkaban. "She's right. Go. You can't save us."

Sirius shook his head. "I'm not leaving either of you behind."

"Yes, you are," Remus said, viciously kicking out at the guard who had hampered their escape, the guard's nose exploding from the force of the blow.

"But..."

Not expecting it, Sirius went down as Anna stunned him. "Ignotus, Amicus, I'm sorry."

His broken arm throbbing, Harry was in tears as he looked over at the cloaked individuals and his tears didn't just stem from the pain of his injury. "I wish..."

"We'll be okay," Justin said softly, although he knew it wasn't true. "Now get out of here before it's too late and that's an order."

Doubting that he'd go unless she made him, Anna grabbed Harry, who was lying close to her, before doing what she didn't want to do and operating her portkey, leaving both Remus and Justin behind. Moments later everyone else had also vanished, the junior Auror the last to vanish as the secondary minor wards finally gave way.

Upon hearing the snapping sound of the collapse, Justin tugged down even more on the hood of his Unspeakable's cloak that he had worn and secured it more tightly at the front. "Right now I'm rather glad I wore this. I suppose this will be bad but if Tom finds out who you are, it will be even worse for you."

"I know," Remus said, imitating Justin's actions. "I just wish I hadn't passed Harry's invisibility cloak to Sirius."

"So do I," Justin said as pops began to sound around them.

Severely outnumbered, Remus and Justin surrendered their wands when ordered to do so.

As they were surrounded by more and more Death Eaters, Justin suspected quite rightly, given that they couldn't disapparate, that the incoming Death Eaters were tied into Tom and that while Tom's wards were up, they could apparate in but not out.

As Sirius had expected they might be, the Death Eaters were actually headed by Tom, who marched up the corridor to face off against Justin and Remus. "Only two rats caught in my trap. Disappointing."

"You should have set your traps wider," Remus remarked smartly. "And maybe you should have primed your trap to go off sooner. A moment longer and we would have been gone."

Another pop sounded behind Tom and a silver-masked individual appeared. "I apologize for my tardiness, my Lord. I was entertaining..."

Justin knew that that Anna must have revived Sirius and done a rapid clean-up job for him to arrive back so quickly. He was right and would have been surprised if he knew exactly how much Sirius had

managed to achieve in the space of the four minutes between being portkeyed out and arriving back.

Suddenly there was yet another pop and another silver masked man appeared. "My apologies, my Lord. I was sleeping."

"It must be nice to have such an efficient workforce," Remus said sarcastically, hate filling him at the sight of the second late arrival.

Tom was far from happy at Remus' sarcasm but he held his temper. "I doubt you'll be quite so witty by the time he's finished with the two of you."

"Maybe not but we'll give it our best shot," Justin said, joining Remus in the war of words, the only weapons they could currently utilize.

Tom knelt down by the felled guard who had prevented Remus from leaving and whose face was currently dripping with blood, courtesy of Remus' boot. "Who did this?"

Barely conscious, the guard didn't respond so Tom got to his feet and trod on the man's injured face, making him scream in agony.

"I said, who did this?"

"Professor Ed..." the man rasped out. "Edwards."

"Where is he?"

"Gone."

"So that explains my traitor," Tom said, before saying to Justin, "But it doesn't tell me who you two are." He turned to Dae. "Altus, do you have any idea?"

"He's Amicus – his voice is rather distinctive." Dae had pointed at Remus as he spoke, completely unaware of Remus' change in status.

"How good of you to join us," Tom said. "And who is your colleague?"

He's no-one I know... I don't recognize his voice," Dae said, when Remus said nothing. "He might be Amicus' protégée, Risus, or, if he's not Risus, then he could be Ignotus. As you know it's a family thing and whoever the previous Ignotus was, he would have appointed an heir to take over from him."

The injured guard spoke up once more before Tom could torture him again. "One of them..." He stopped to spit out blood. "...mentioned Ignotus."

"Then it's time to send yet another Ignotus to his death," Tom said softly, now believing that Justin was Ignotus and not Remus. "I believe, however, that this Ignotus should go out in a slightly different manner to his predecessor; something a little more painful than a simple Killing Curse. Tell me, Ignotus, did you see my display when I ended the lives of your predecessor and those with him in Diagon Alley?"

Justin's trepidation escalated as he recalled seeing Harry's memory of what had happened to Amelia and the others in Diagon Alley when Tom had first revealed himself. "Yes."

"I do believe I detect a note of fear in your voice," Tom said gleefully. "And if I was you I'd be afraid, very afraid; being torn apart by a werewolf isn't how I'd want to die." He turned to Dae. "Let's keep this execution private. I don't want Black and Edwards trying anything, as it's obvious they must be in this together."

He then beckoned to Sirius, throwing up a privacy bubble. "You're supposed to be Edwards' best friend – you should have told me of anything you knew."

"I didn't know he was going to betray you, my Lord."

"And yet you were late getting here. I was in Germany and still managed to arrive before you."

Sirius flicked the man he now believed to be his brother a venomous glance. "True, but I wasn't the only late arrival."

"That may be," Tom acknowledged. "But I still find it hard to believe you knew nothing about Edwards, an accusation I can't lay at Altus' door."

"I've sworn to tell you everything I know," Sirius lied although he was well aware of the oath Remus would have sworn in his stead. "And if I had known that that traitorous bastard was going to let you down, I would have done everything in my power to stop him."

Tom was still far from satisfied. "You said you were entertaining – who?"

"Cammie Sebastian, my Lord."

"Then let's go see her." He turned to Dae. "Take them to the cells. Tomorrow morning you can start by interrogating your old friend, Amicus." He then flicked his wand, dropping the wards that were now tied to him and not to the prison itself.

Laurifer Manor

Sirius was side-apparated directly into his rooms and he opened his bedroom door. "Cammie, are you decent?"

"Hold on."

Cammie Sebastian walked out, belting a robe around her waist, and she bowed low when she saw who was with Sirius. "My Lord."

"Was Blackwell with you when he was summoned?"

"Yes, my Lord, up until a few minutes ago."

"What were you doing?"

Cammie's cheeks became stained with red as she said, "Making love, my Lord."

"And are you willing to swear an oath..."

Sirius pulled out his wand immediately, unsurprised when Tom imitated his actions. "I swear on my life and my magic that my loyalty does not lie with Gareth Edwards nor am I in collusion with Sirius Black. I also swear that I spent the last hour with this woman."

Sirius had to bite back his sigh of relief as the oath worked; he had been half afraid it would kill him but he had kept telling himself that his loyalty lay with Harry Potter and it had been impossible to be in collusion with himself. He then lowered his wand, ending the oath and thus enabling him to lie again. "As always, my loyalty is to you, my Lord."

"Forgive me for doubting you, Simon," Tom said, finally convinced. "I will leave you and Miss Sebastian to your business. For your loyalty you will share the duties of interrogating our prisoners with Altus. Present yourself at the dungeons at midday. Goodnight."

Sirius slipped his arm around Cammie's waist. "Goodnight." He then bundled her into the bedroom, throwing up a privacy bubble and several other spells of protection. "That was too close."

Cammie morphed into Tonks, who had indeed spent the last hour with Sirius in Azkaban. "I was worried that I might not have gotten her quite right when I transformed."

"I was worried he might see the pensieve. You left it out," Sirius growled, nodding towards the small bowl that was sitting on the dresser by his bed.

Tonks blushed. "Sorry but I barely had time to change my clothes and view your memory of Sebastian before you arrived back."

"I'm sorry for snapping," Sirius said, squeezing Tonks' arm. "You did brilliantly under the circumstances. We almost fell down on this one and its only thanks to you that my secret is safe."

It was only as Anna had resuscitated Sirius that he had realized that her actions in taking him out might well cost them everything. Tonks had saved the day by thinking on her feet and coming up with the idea of Sirius entertaining a woman as an excuse for his tardiness.

"You're lucky it is. I don't know how you manage to lie so convincingly all of the time," Tonks told him. "I don't think I could."

"You just did," Sirius responded. "And it gets easier over time."

"That might be so but if we don't want Tom to find out about our lies, you had better somehow find the real Cammie and obliviate her."

"I've got her address."

Tonks raised an eyebrow. "You have the address of a fellow Death Eater?"

"I occasionally need a date for my dinners with Tom and Cho, and, despite her poor choice of secondary career, I actually like Cam." Sirius' face was a little red as he explained what he had already told Harry.

"And her first career choice is?"

"She's a trainee healer," Sirius said going even redder at his cousin's look. "Yes, we converse!"

"Then go 'converse' right now and whisper sweet nothings to her," Tonks suggested with a cheeky grin, "such as 'obliviate' and 'slept with me'."

Sirius growled something under his breath that Tonks didn't catch as he grabbed his mask and vanished.

Finally relaxing, Tonks grinned once more before morphing back into Cammie and sitting on the bed, helping herself to a glass of the champagne that Sirius' fridge was well stocked with.

Sirius returned a short time later, an unconscious Cammie in his arms. "I think it best if I deliver you home now. I don't want to have to explain to Tom why I have two of you here if he comes back."

Tonks agreed, only too glad to leave Tom's lair.

On his return, Sirius stared down for a long time at the unconscious redhead in his bed, before heading for the shower, after which he got into bed beside Cammie. Exhausted, it wasn't long before he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Salisbury Towers, Manchester

Genevieve apparated into her home having discovered that her daughter was missing from Pansy's and Harry's London flat. "Patrick, has Pansy been here?"

"No," Patrick said, barely looking up at his wife as he sat in an armchair reading a book. "Why?"

"Nothing," Genevieve said and, well aware of that Tom was likely going to grill her, if not torture her, about her daughter's association with a traitor, she decided she had better go back and face the music; it would only be worse if she delayed. "Don't expect me until morning at the earliest." She then disappeared.

Neville dropped the invisibility spell after a few long minutes and no return by Genevieve, Pansy tucked under his arm. "That was too close."

"Dad, come with us," Pansy pleaded. "After what's happened she'll press you for information – you know she will."

"I'd never give you up," Patrick told his daughter. "You know that."

"I do but I don't trust her." Pansy was in tears. "Please, Dad."

"Let me pack," Patrick said, deciding his daughter might be right.

While Patrick left the room, Pansy headed towards the wall, moved a painting and began casting a series of spells.

Patrick came in just as Pansy completed the series and yelled, "No, Pansy!"

The safe swung open and Pansy reached inside and grabbed a bag. "Why not, Dad? I think you've earned a divorce settlement."

"Really?" Genevieve asked as she walked in, Patrick's yell having drowned out the sound of her apparition as well as her footsteps as she came up behind him. "Pansy, you should know better than to think I wouldn't ward something as precious as my safe."

"Obviously not well enough otherwise I wouldn't have gotten into it."

"True but you're not leaving with anything out of it," Genevieve told her daughter, before holding out her hand. "Hand it over."

"Dad, we can take her down," Pansy said to her father.

"He can't raise a finger to me," Genevieve said with a slow self-satisfied smile. "I made sure of that when we married. However, the same can't be said of the other way around."

"I'm sorry, Pansy," Patrick said, having no choice but to relinquish his wand when Genevieve nudged him in the back with her wand.

"Now, Pansy, if you don't want me to kill your precious father, you'll lower your wand."

"No."

"Then I'll kill Patrick." Genevieve shoved her wand into the crook of her husband's neck. "Avada Ke..."

"No!" Pansy screamed.

Genevieve stopped. "Your wands."

"No, don't. Just get out."

"I can't let her kill you, Dad."

Pansy moved forward and handed her wand to her mother. Having little choice, Neville did the same when Genevieve repeated her demands, including her daughter in her threats this time.

Genevieve promptly snapped both wands. "I don't like to leave loose ends and I don't believe in divorce." She then aimed her wand at her husband. "Avada Kedavra."

"Dad!" Pansy shot forward, not caring that her mother was already turning her wand on her, but Pansy was stopped by Neville grabbing her wrist.

"Back off!" Genevieve warned.

Neville shoved Pansy behind him so that he was bodily protecting her and although he was afraid, Neville's voice was defiant as he said, "So I suppose you take us to Tom now."

"I suppose you're right." Genevieve pulled out a small rope from her pocket and walked over towards the couple. "You're going to take this otherwise I'll kill you."

As a defeated looking Pansy reached out with one hand for the rope, she used her free one to chuck the dirt that she had picked up from the plant pot behind her at her surprised mother, Neville's bigger body having hidden what Pansy had been doing.

Genevieve instinctively lashed out with a spell, hitting her daughter in the face while at the same time she rubbed at her eyes with her free hand.

Aware she couldn't see him, Neville barreled forward, smashing into her, both of them careening to the ground. Then, sitting on top of Genevieve, Neville did what he had never done before in his life and punched a woman. He knew he wouldn't be able to break her jaw as Remus had done to Harry but he had every intention of doing the best he could.

Three punches later and Genevieve went still. Grabbing the wand that now lay a few feet away, Neville aimed it at her. "Avada..." He then stopped. He couldn't kill her although he wanted to.

Deciding to make sure she had no other weapons, Neville used a disarming spell, ducking as several knives and another wand flew towards him. Although he suspected the worst, Neville still turned to check on Pansy and his heart sank as he saw that her eyes were open but unseeing. He didn't know how he was going to tell Harry.

Aware that he wouldn't be able to get back into the Parkinson household without a member of the Parkinson family, Neville floated both Pansy's and Patrick's bodies towards the fireplace, before carefully lowering them into it. And then he returned to collect Genevieve.

More than a little angry and upset, Neville was far rougher with Genevieve and, once he was standing inside of the massive fireplace, after using his belt to secure Pansy's and Patrick's hands to Genevieve's, Neville buried his fingers deep in Genevieve's long hair, twisting them so that he had a tight grip, before dropping down floo powder and calling out 'Potter Longbottom Potter Neville'. Green flames flared up and Neville and his cargo were whisked away.

Potter Place

Hearing Neville's yell, Hermione, who was still in tears after hearing about Justin and Remus, came running out into the hall with Ron, and Sophia and Julian Viking. "Pansy! Oh my God!"

Neville began to finally fall apart. "She killed them, Hermione. She was going to kill me too."

The calmest of the group, Julian, walked over and released Pansy's and Patrick's hands, before vanishing with them.

Neville then collapsed onto the floor, his legs refusing to support him, the adrenalin that had fueled his attack on Genevieve now completely gone.

Sophia knew shock when she saw it and she too walked over, putting an arm around Neville and helping him up from the floor. "Let's take you into the other room, Neville."

As she did, Hermione spoke to Ron. "Truss her up well and then alert Commander Jameson we have a prisoner."

When Anna arrived with Ron, she also had a guard of four Aurors with her. "One of Voldemort's Inner Circle – that's quite a catch, Longbottom."

"It wasn't worth the price," Neville said, his voice calm and steady, Julian having given him some calming potion after delivering the bodies upstairs. "Patrick and Pansy Parkinson are dead."

"I'm going to need to see your memory of what happened," Anna said immediately.

"He's already put it in Harry's pensieve," Hermione told her, pointing towards the dining table. "It's in there."

When Anna emerged, she again spoke to Neville. "I need you to swear on oath that the memory has not been tampered with in any way and that it is a true memory of what happened this evening."

Neville swore his oath, before looking over at Genevieve, who was still out cold. "I almost killed her."

"But you didn't," Anna said as she walked over to Genevieve and revived her. "Welcome to Potter Place, Parkinson. I expect your visit here to be short-lived."

Harry suddenly appeared, having been one of the last people to be treated by Lucy and her staff, having refused to receive treatment until everyone else had been dealt with. He was stunned to see a rather battered Genevieve Parkinson in his home. "What is she doing here?"

Neville stood up, although his legs felt like jelly. "Harry, I'm so, so sorry."

"What for?"

Anna quickly summed it up. "She's here because she's being tried for the murder of Patrick Parkinson and, I'm really sorry, Harry, but also of Pansy."

Harry paled. "She killed her own family?"

"Killing Curse," Anna said in explanation. "They didn't stand a chance."

"But why did Pansy confront her?"

"Ron told us what happened in Azkaban and when Pansy heard that your identity had probably been compromised, she was afraid for her father," Hermione said in a trembling voice. "She disappeared but not before Neville grabbed her and vanished with her. After that I don't know what happened."

"If you wish to view Longbottom's memory after I use it for evidence, then I'll make an exception this time and return it," Anna softly told Harry, before barking out an order to her men. "Escort the prisoner out."

A surprisingly calm Harry turned to Neville as Anna vanished with Harry's pensieve. "Neville, what happened? Make it quick."

Neville gave him a brief summary, watching in puzzlement as Harry checked his wands. "Where are you going?"

"To make sure that bitch gets what she deserves."

Anna was more than a little surprised when Harry apparated in. "These are BritAD proceedings, Risus."

"Not if she's found guilty," Harry countered before putting up a privacy bubble and revealing something no-one else had known, Remus not having made the recruitment through Harry until after Remus' appointment as Ignotus. "Patrick Parkinson was one of ours and Pansy was my wife. I'm therefore not taking no for answer."

"You might not have much choice. Ignotus said he was suspending you for managing to give Amicus a Dark Mark."

Harry merely shrugged, deciding not to reveal something nobody except for him, Remus and Justin were aware of. "Until Ignotus tells me that to my face it doesn't stand, so I'm staying, Commander."

Given that he had just lost his wife, Anna decided to cut Harry a break and she dropped the bubble. "Okay then, but if she is guilty, then you can execute her."

Justin had said time and time again that Anna didn't have it in her to take a life and Harry believed then that his best friend was probably right and that it was simply an excuse for her to get someone else to do it. "Very well."

"Then let's get on with it."

Genevieve's face was bruised and more than a little battered and she winced as she looked up at Harry. "Another Unspeakable – you lot must breed like rabbits." She smiled cruelly. "Then again at least we're going to have the pleasure of exterminating two of your kind very shortly."

"I might say the same about yours, except we're already one up on you with Snape gone," Harry retorted as he sat down.

Anna took over. "I'm Commander Jameson of BritAD and these are Senior Aurors Chivers and Danvers, both of whom witnessed Neville

Longbottom's memory of your attack on your family, and they have duly agreed to act as witnesses in this trial. Finally, this is Unspeakable Risus."

"The mysterious protégée, and if you're here questioning me, then that must mean that Tom really does have Ignotus. Despite the guard's claim, we still weren't sure. So at least I'll go to the grave knowing that your kind has lost another leader and whoever this Amicus was," Genevieve said, looking delighted. "And don't even bother giving me the spiel about if you find me guilty. I already know I'm guilty and since you've got Longbottom's memory of what happened stashed in that pensieve I can't deny it."

"So you freely admit to killing your husband and your daughter?" Anna asked, making notes.

"They were traitors and deserved to die," Genevieve said without a shred of remorse.

"Just as you do," Harry said coldly.

"That is a matter of opinion," Genevieve countered.

"And it's my opinion that you deserve to die at Unspeakable Risus' hand if you're found guilty."

"Look, why waste my time going over what I did?" Genevieve said dismissively. If she was going to die, she didn't want to have to sit and listen to Anna dissecting her every move before the same end result. "As I've said, you've seen Longbottom's memory, so just get down to the nitty gritty."

Anna fished out the obligatory black piece of cloth, making Genevieve sigh as if bored. "Fine, we'll skip the long-winded spiel. By her own confession and my viewing of Neville Longbottom's memory I find Genevieve Parkinson guilty of murder, the sentence for which is death." She then asked for and received the two witnesses' assent before she turned back to Harry and said, "She's all yours, Risus."

Harry stood up, although he hesitated when it came down to killing Genevieve, trying to decide if he should reveal who he was or not.

Genevieve laughed and taunted Harry. "Poor little Unspeakable too afraid to kill me?"

Uncaring of the two Aurors in the room, and deciding in that moment that he did want Genevieve to know who was going to take her life, Harry lowered his hood. "No, Genevieve, I'm not. You see, you killed a good man and my wife today."

Unlike Snape had, Genevieve didn't question Harry's unspoken claim as to his alternate identity. "You're really going to kill the grandmother of your son?"

"Why not, you killed his mother." Harry then raised his wand and uttered the same spell he had used on Snape. "Corium Abeo Renevo."

Bound, Genevieve had no way to defend herself as the spell hit, and she fell from her seat and hit the wall behind her, cutting her head open as her body thrashed around like a fish out of water as her skin turned to dust, re-grew and then turned to dust again.

"Harry, enough!" Anna barked out.

Harry dropped the spell and Anna lit into him. "You were supposed to execute her, not bloody well torture her. We don't do things like that."

"No, we let someone else dirty their hands instead," Harry snapped back at Anna. "Find someone else to kill her." He then turned his wand on the two Aurors and obliviated them, before glaring at Genevieve, throwing up his hood, and stalking off.

Potter Place

When Sirius arrived back the next morning, after hearing the news from Neville, he sought Harry out. "How are you holding up?"

Harry turned around, his eyes red-rimmed. "Not great. In the space of a day my best friend and former guardian have been captured by Tom, and my wife and her father have been killed by Genevieve."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Sirius said as he pulled Harry into a hug. "I'm afraid the news I have isn't going to help."

Harry let Sirius hold him for a short time before pulling away. "You've got to lead their interrogation, haven't you?"

"Yes, together with Altus I start today. I'll go as easy as I can but if I let up too much, Tom will become suspicious again. I barely made it out of this one."

"Justin and Remus knew what they volunteering for and the likely outcome if they were caught, just as I did," Harry said, trying to be pragmatic.

"It still doesn't make it any easier on me," Sirius said, helping himself to a scotch to settle his almost shot nerves. "I'm going to have to torture people I care deeply about and I'm not sure I can. I'm afraid I'm going to break cover."

"You can't, Sirius," Harry said firmly, his hand shaking as he took a mouthful of his own drink. "Now that Tom obviously knows I'm involved, we need you more than ever."

"I know but it's too much to ask."

"And yet I'm going to ask it of you," Harry said before revealing what he had kept hidden from Anna. "I'm next in line in command after Remus and Justin, and although I don't want to order you to do it, I will if I have to, because if you don't do this, we may as well roll over and die."

"I really don't really have much choice then."

Harry couldn't miss the bitterness in Sirius' voice. "Are you angry because Remus promoted me over you or angry at what you have to do?"

"At what I have to do," Sirius clarified. "But I have to be honest and say that I'm surprised Remus did it."

"He told me he had trust issues but that if he and Justin were incapacitated he knew I would get the job done."

"So he was worried something might go wrong in Azkaban?"

"Yes, but you know Remus, he always likes to try and plan ahead, a trait that I don't necessarily share, as I proved to Anna Jameson just now," Harry said in a dry voice. "I tortured Genevieve Parkinson when I was supposed to be executing her, and so when Jameson took umbrage to it I told her to clean up her own mess and find someone else to kill Parkinson."

"Do you want me to take care of her, although you should know that Remus suspended me again and, by the way, you too."

"Suspensions I'm revoking," Harry said, carrying the authority to do it with Remus out the picture. "So if you would deal with Parkinson I'd appreciate it."

"Then I'll make the offer."

"How did things go with Sebastian?"

"I sent her on her way none the wiser to the fact that she'd been used," Sirius said, although his cheeks were burning.

Harry knew what that meant. "You really slept with her first though, didn't you?"

"Yes."

Harry's eyes narrowed at his response, reminding Sirius very much of Remus and he suddenly saw what Remus had meant by Harry would get the job done, Harry's next few questions all being rather pointed.

"Is that a problem?"

"It was just sex, Harry," Sirius assured him. "And she seemed delighted she'd slept with me, thus bringing her once again to Tom's attention."

"Sleeping her way to the top or do you think she genuinely likes you?"

"I'd say sleeping her way to the top," Sirius said after a few moments' contemplation. "She's made no bones about the fact that she admires Tom and his ideals."

"Then she's not someone to trust."

"Although I have to say I like her, no, she's most definitely not."

"Then watch your back."

Sirius looked at his watch. "I have to get back soon, so I suppose I'd better head for Seashore and deal with Parkinson."

"I'm coming too."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I want to watch that bitch die at your hand. I'd do it myself but now that I've calmed down, I have to admit that Parkinson brought up a good point to me; she's Will's grandmother, and how do I tell my son that his father killed his grandmother?"

"The same way you tell him that the bitch killed his mother." Sirius put his drink down. "But I'm happy to do it if you think you can't."

Seashore

Anna was surprised to see Harry arriving with Sirius. "I thought you weren't going to do the dirty deed."

"I know what you thought," Harry said brusquely. "And, just so that you know, as next in line in command with Remus and Justin out of the picture, I've revoked Sirius' suspension as well as my own."

Anna's lips tightened as she checked Harry's credentials to ensure he was telling the truth. "So what now?"

"I'm sending Sirius in."

Unable to carry out the execution herself, Anna reluctantly agreed to let Sirius deal with Genevieve.

Genevieve looked over in surprise as Simon Blackwell entered her cell and sat down, putting his feet up on the bed opposite her as the door slammed behind him. "Don't tell me they caught you as well."

"I just fancied a break by the sea."

Genevieve had always hated Simon's sarcasm. "I don't see what's so funny. They're going to execute me and then probably you."

"Actually they're not going to execute me at all but I'm afraid I can't say the same for you," Sirius said, pulling out his wand.

"Is this some kind of joke?"

Sirius tapped his ring with his wand. "It's no joke, Parkinson."

"Black!"

"In the flesh," Sirius said before standing back up. "Any final words?"

Just as she had the previous day, Genevieve simply accepted Sirius' alter ego without question. However, she did get a dig in with her response to Sirius' question. "Yes, you're supposed to be torturing your friends later today, aren't you?"

"So glad you reminded me. I need a little practice first." Sirius turned his wand on Genevieve. "Crucio."

In the confines of the cell, Genevieve smashed her head against the wall, screaming out her pain.

Sirius stopped when she started gagging, not wishing to embarrass himself by throwing up. Usually he took a stomach settling potion before having to torture prisoners but hadn't done so this time. "As much as I'd like to stay and play with you, I have a rescue to plan."

"You'll never get them out," Genevieve panted, blood running down her face.

"And you'll never know," Sirius said, before aiming his wand at the door, opening it to reveal Harry and a furious Anna standing there. "I was going to take the honors but I suspect that that upon reflection Harry might like them."

Harry met Genevieve's eyes and, without stopping to check with Anna, he incanted, "Avada Kedavra."

After swiftly confirming that Genevieve was indeed dead, Sirius then stepped outside to face Anna, who began to berate him.

"I've already told Harry that this sort of behavior is not permissible."

"If you wanted a clean kill, then you should have done it yourself, instead of leaving it to me and Harry to deal with your problems."

"You're both as bad as Ignotus," Anna snapped, hating that Sirius had pointed out a weak spot in her armor.

"I think I'm going to say thank you," Harry said and he turned and walked out.

Sirius tutted at her. "You really are burning your bridges one by one, aren't you, Commander?"

He then threw up the hood of his cloak and followed Harry out.

Next Chapter: Sirius faces the toughest time of his life; Tom makes a bad decision.

Chapter 73: A Harsh Lesson

Later that day

About to swap places with Dae, Sirius was shaking as he faced off against a chained up and bloody Justin, although only Justin's stomach and legs were exposed, the Unspeakable's cloak protecting the remainder of his body, although unfortunately it gaped just below his belly button. "My turn."

Even though he himself had owned one, Dae still sometimes found it hard to believe that the Unspeakable's cloak couldn't be moved aside and it frustrated him no end. "I've had to concentrate on where I can reach, although I suspect his back is more than a little bruised."

Sirius could see a pole lying on the floor and he suspected that Dae had used it on Justin. "You really have no finesse, do you, Altus?"

"I'd like to see you do better, Renovo," Dae challenged.

"I know you would but Tom has requested your presence in Amicus' cell."

Dae glanced over at Justin's hooded figure. "I'll be back here tomorrow, Ignotus, and we'll see if I can't improve on my current efforts."

Ignoring the guards behind him, Sirius walked over to Justin. "I'm very sorry to tell you this but I do hope you realize that this is going to hurt me more than it's going to hurt you."

The guards guffawed, thinking that Sirius was employing irony, not appreciating for one moment that Sirius meant every word.

Justin wearily lifted his head although he knew Sirius wouldn't be able to see his face. "Well, I suppose in that case I should say something like I forgive you."

In the interrogation room where Remus was being held, there was no such regret.

"You'll scream in the end, Amicus."

"I think not," Remus bit back. "I wouldn't give you the satisfaction."

Remus held out until Dae produced his Achilles heel, silver nitrate.

"For fuck's sake, please don't."

"He's a werewolf?" Tom asked, quickly coming to the only conclusion he could.

"I can't answer that," Dae said, before returning to face Remus, slicing cuts into his skin up his legs. "When I hear you scream I'll stop."

Remus granted Dae's wish a short time later, his pain filled cries echoing throughout the cell block.

It was then that Tom realized something else. "It's too much of a coincidence that your former partner is a werewolf and so was Lupin, your former friend." He walked over to Remus. "Are you Lupin?"

Remus said nothing.

"I think you are," Tom decided. "You're the right build and height, and the coincidence is far too great. Let's go pay a visit to Ignotus."

Justin wanted to weep when he spotted Tom standing in his doorway but he showed a good deal of bravado as he asked, "Come to play as well?"

"Yes," Tom said, before smirking. "You should know that Remus Lupin has confirmed you're Ignotus."

Sirius managed not to show his surprise at the comment as Tom announced this but Justin simply snorted in spite of his pain. "You think Amicus is Lupin?"

"I know Amicus is Lupin," Tom said in a strong voice. "It's amazing what Lupin admitted to when we administered silver nitrate."

Justin's calm vanished and fear for Remus swamped him, but he still managed to keep his head. "Lupin is not Amicus and he'd still better be alive, you bastard."

Tom turned to Sirius. "Break his leg for that slur and do it slowly."

Justin screamed out his agony before thankfully passing out.

Tom nodded approvingly. "Now you've dealt with him, let's go back to Amicus. I do believe we have another way of confirming his identity. Renovo, you're going to heal him if he agrees to take the antidote to the silver nitrate."

Upon returning to Remus' interrogation room, Tom offered Remus the antidote if he took down his hood.

Remus held out as long as he could but then, in agony, he finally agreed and Tom released Remus' hand, allowing him to take down the hood to swallow the antidote before flicking his wand at Remus' wrist, preventing him from putting up his hood again.

As the antidote kicked in, Remus began screaming even louder than before and Tom informed him what to expect. "Now that we've confirmed your identity, Lupin, I think you should die a traitor's death, which is how your Miss Weasley died, except your death will be a little more drawn out, if you catch my drift."

Remus didn't, as just like Justin had, he'd passed out.

A short time later it was Justin's turn to be healed and once again conscious, he sagged as Sirius walked back in, guards flanking him from behind. "I'm here to heal you so that you'll be ready to go again tomorrow, Ignatus, just as Lupin will be."

Justin wanted to scream and rant at Sirius at the thought of going through the same agony the next day. His only consolation as he hung there while Sirius healed him was that Sirius had managed to find a way to tell him that Remus was still alive. He was, however, worried about Remus as Sirius' words had also managed to tell him that Tom had somehow confirmed Remus' identity and that wasn't going to be good.

By the end of the third day Justin and Remus had decided they both would have rather died and both of them had begged for death on more than one occasion but Sirius and Dae had rejected their pleas: Sirius because he refused to believe that he wouldn't somehow find

a way to get them out, and Dae because he took pleasure from refusing.

On the seventh day, they finally caught a break, and Sirius actually found himself alone with Justin, the guards having been ordered to bring in another prisoner. He quickly walked over to Justin, holding a knife against his stomach just in case Dae should walk in and question why he was standing so close to the prisoner. After his run-in with Tom, he didn't dare take any chances at all.

"How are you doing?" Sirius didn't give Justin a chance to answer as he went on. "Sorry, that was a stupid question."

"True," Justin said tiredly.

"Justin, I meant what I said that first day and I'm really sorry for what I've have to do."

"I know, and I'm sorry about Remus."

"The good news is is that Tom still doesn't know who you are and he's absolutely convinced you're Ignotus. The bad news is is that if you don't tell him differently, you know what he'll do to you."

"I think I'd prefer he doesn't know. If he finds out he has Harry's best friend here, who knows what he'd do to me. As it is, I imagine he's going to use Remus to kill me now that he knows that he's a werewolf."

"He is and your execution is set for tomorrow and then Remus' for the day after."

"Thank fuck for that," Justin croaked, meaning it. "And I don't care if it's Remus who does it - I can't take any more of this."

Sirius glanced behind him. "The cage they're going to place you in will be outgoing-portkey exempt, but you should take this, just in case." Sirius then flicked his wand at Justin's wrist, releasing it. "It's a portkey that will get you into Seashore if you can somehow manage to escape what Tom has planned. I..." Sirius broke off his speech as he grabbed Justin's wrist as Justin pulled out a wand from his pocket and turned it on himself. "Justin, you can't give up now."

"I said I can't take it anymore," Justin said, tears welling up in his eyes. "Please, let go of my wrist."

"I can't do that, Justin." Sirius turned Justin's wrist and forced his hand towards his pocket. "Please put the wand back in your pocket. It might just be the only thing that will get you out of here alive, apart from the portkey of course."

"I suppose the right thing to say is that I haven't put up with this shit for this long to give up now, although it's what I want to do more than anything," Justin said as he shoved his wand back in his pocket.

"I know," Sirius said, cupping Justin's face over the hood. "And again, I'm so sorry, Justin, for what I'm putting you through."

Justin coughed, wincing as pain ripped through his ribs. "Hells bells, you're rather good at what you do."

Sirius cursed himself for not doing it sooner, and, dipping into his pocket he withdrew a vial, handing it to Justin, who took down his hood and poured the contents of the vial into his mouth.

"It should help with the pain for the next few hours. And don't forget to take this." Sirius held out the portkey again.

The worst of his pain now being held at bay, Justin slipped the portkey into the pocket of his cloak and tried to think about the people he might have an outside chance of returning to if he didn't kill himself. "How is everyone back home?"

Sirius decided not to mention about Patrick's and Pansy's deaths as it would likely be too upsetting for Justin. "They're all fine although they're all worried sick about you, and what I'm telling them isn't helping matters."

"Then tell them that I'm doing okay and I'll see them soon, although we both know that probably isn't going to happen."

"Justin, it is, and if you can't get out, then I'm going to break cover."

"You can't. If you do that everything I've gone through will have been for nothing and you may as well have simply let me kill myself."

"But..."

"It's okay, really," Justin said softly before he said exactly what Harry had when Sirius had gone to him. "I knew what could happen when I volunteered for the Azkaban mission and you knew what you might have to do."

"Even so..."

"Dad, I don't blame you."

Sirius had to swallow several times before he was able to answer. "You call me 'Dad' now after what I've done to you?"

"I'd have done the same to you if our places were reversed."

"No, you wouldn't, although I wish I could take your place right now."

"Believe me, no you don't. You are really good at what you do."

"Actually I'm sorry to say it, but I'm the best at what I do," Sirius said, stroking Justin's dirty and sweaty hair back off his tearstained face. "Although I've been going easy on you as much as I can."

"You could have fooled me."

"As long as it fools everyone else, then that's all that matters."

Justin laughed raggedly, spitting up blood and Sirius looked over his shoulder before casting several healing spells. "Are you hurting?"

"Not right now," Justin said truthfully. "Dad, you'd better chain me back up."

"I hate doing this," Sirius said, as he flicked his wand at Justin's arm.

"Not as much as I hate it," Justin said, giving his adoptive father a smile. His smile faltered as he heard footsteps. "Someone's coming. Put my hood up."

As the guard came walking through the door, Sirius had already tugged up the hood and sliced into Justin's stomach, not deep enough to be fatal, but deep enough to hurt Justin, and Sirius was glad of the silver mask that was hiding his distress at doing so.

"I think it's my turn now," Dae said in quite a nasty voice. "Tom needs to see you, Renovo." He then turned to Justin as Sirius had no choice but to go. "Let's have a little fun, shall we?"

Sirius made his way up to see Tom, bowing low when he arrived. "Dae said you needed to see me."

"Cho isn't feeling very well," Tom said, leading the way to the bedroom. "I think she might be pregnant again but since she's been bleeding on and off, we're not entirely sure."

Sirius had helped deliver Darius, Tom's son, and it now looked as though he might well have to do the same again with another of his progeny at some point. After taking off his silver mask, he smiled at Cho, who was rather pale. "Are you feeling nauseous?"

"A little."

"Let's do a quick scan then."

A few minutes later Sirius had confirmed that Tom was indeed going to be a father again, Cho was expecting another son. "Congratulations, your son should be making his arrival in just over five months' time. I've also cast a spell that will prevent Cho from bleeding, although that is quite normal during some pregnancies. And I'll arrange for one of my team to deliver some anti-nausea potions."

"Thank you," Tom said, leading the way back to his sitting room. "I don't want you to take part in the mission in China next week as I'd prefer for you to stay here in case Cho needs you."

"Of course," Sirius said, more than a little pleased he wouldn't be involved in what he suspected would be a bloody and drawn out battle. "Might I suggest that Levitt and Pushkin go in my place?" Sirius loathed both men and wouldn't be shedding any tears if they didn't make it.

"I'll accept that recommendation," Tom said, before dismissing Sirius. "You may go – Dae can play with Ignotus today. I suppose he's still saying nothing."

"No - he's a tough nut to crack."

"I wouldn't expect anything less from Ignotus," Tom said, leading the way down to the dungeons. "Actually, before you do go, I want you to take a look at Lupin again for me. I want to make sure he's up to the job of dispatching Ignotus."

Potter Place

Harry was in his study when Sirius arrived back. "Did you get the portkey to any of them?"

Sirius nodded. "Yes, to Justin, but I should have broken them out earlier."

"You couldn't, Sirius," Harry said, his own face lined with worry from the stress. "We all agreed..."

"I know what we agreed but Remus is my best friend and Justin is, well, he's my son," Sirius said, his voice shaking. "And he called me Dad, Harry. He called me Dad."

Sirius then broke down and wept, the strain of the previous week all at once becoming too much for him to bear.

8th April 2001

Barely able to keep his feet, Justin was forced up the stairs from the dungeons and out of the house towards a similar dais to the one Harry had seen Ginny die on. However instead of a pyre on top of it, this time there was a massive barred cage with a cloaked man in chains in it.

Justin was stunned to see that not only was Tom watching him, but he had Cho with him. "What is this... a family outing?"

Tom immediately withdrew his wand at Justin's sarcastic comment, but at a whispered word from Dae, he lowered it to check his watch. "Any last requests, Ignotus?"

"That you don't kill me would be a good one."

This Tom laughed at Justin's sarcasm. "I'm afraid that won't happen."

"Then how about at least giving me a fighting chance by freeing my hands."

"Again, that won't be happening."

Sirius walked up to the dais at that moment. "My Lord, my apologies for my tardiness."

"I was beginning to believe you'd decided to stay away."

"I simply let time get away from me." Sirius had decided to act to try to somehow get Justin out and he had come to the conclusion that this would be the best time to do it. But looking around at the amount of Death Eaters everywhere, including around the cage, Sirius knew it would be suicidal if he tried anything.

Up on the dais, Remus could feel Justin's terror and aware that his change was almost on him, he apologized. "I wish this could have gone down differently."

"It's not your fault," Justin assured him in a firm voice although inside he was shaking. "And I don't blame you."

"Very touching." It was now Tom's turn to fill his words with sarcasm. "Altus, affix this ribbon to Ignotus' arm."

As he was doing so, Justin's fear increased as Remus contorted in pain.

Dae stepped back. "I think we should all get out of the way, just in case anything goes wrong. He's changing."

Tom stood back, as did Sirius, and they all watched as Remus changed, his cloak dropping away as he did. Soon a howling werewolf stood in the cage.

All at once, suicide or not, Sirius couldn't bear it, and he went to move forward, only for Tom to say, "Goodbye."

Sirius had left it too late and Justin was whisked inside of the cage to join Remus.

Unaware of what his father had been about to do, Justin concentrated on Remus, his heart beating wildly as he faced him. Justin resisted the temptation to back up against the bars as Remus moved slowly closer, his nose twitching.

All went quiet for a moment and then, without warning, Remus leapt into the air, Justin stumbling as he did so causing him to fall to the ground and Remus to fly over his head, smashing into the bars of the cage and momentarily dazing himself from the force he had put into the leap.

Justin used the moment to curl up into a ball, bringing his knees up as far as he could to his face, and, screaming in agony as he did it, sliding his hands down his back and under his feet, a dislocated shoulder aiding him in his efforts.

Justin's screams refocused Remus' attention on his intended victim and, as Remus readied himself for a second attack, so did Justin.

Assured now that the bars would hold, Tom moved forward onto the dais, as did everyone else of importance. The remainder of the crowd moved to surround the dais so that they could get a better view of what was going on inside of the cage. The mass movement momentarily distracted Remus and he snapped his head around to growl at the murmuring crowd, buying Justin enough time to awkwardly manuevere his hand into his pocket and extricate the wand he'd intended to use to kill himself.

It was not a moment too soon, Remus returning his attention to Justin and leaping forward at the prone young man just as Justin aimed his wand and screamed out 'Confringo,' blasting Remus backwards before using the same spell Sirius had done in Azkaban. "Nebulosus."

Standing watching as Justin and Remus vanished from sight in the dense fog Justin had created, Sirius had already withdrawn his wands as this was the exact sort of opportunity he could use to help

Justin to escape and maybe release Remus as well. Justin, however, was about to do both on his own.

Next to Sirius, Dae sent a dispelling spell at the fog, but inside the cage, Justin's hand had already dove into his pocket again, this time withdrawing a small incendiary device he had had left over from the attack on Azkaban as well as the portkey Sirius had given to him.

As the fog cleared, yellow light almost blinded those watching as a loud explosion rocked the dais, blowing the bars of the cage apart and Justin out of it, clearing the dais and his audience by a good ten feet.

Free from the confines of the cage, although he didn't want to leave Remus behind, a dizzy and almost deaf Justin operated the emergency portkey, just as he felt teeth wrap around his arm.

Seashore

Anna Jameson, who together with her team, had been waiting in the arrival room the portkey had been tied into on the off-chance Justin did get out, turned her wand on the werewolf that had appeared with the Unspeakable. "Reducto."

"No!" Justin screamed as a hole was blown in Remus' shoulder, having been unable to hear Anna's spell until it was too late. "Stun him! He's on our side."

The four Aurors with Anna all reacted to the order and five stunners hit Remus at once, bringing him down. Anna immediately ran over and apparated herself and Remus into the cell where he usually transformed, where she stepped away from him and aimed her wand at his wound, using a temporary field dressing that she hoped would hold. Then she slammed shut the solid steel door, before reappearing where Justin was being held at wandpoint.

Anna pointed towards the door. "Drop the wand and then go through there."

Justin shook his head. "I can't hear."

One of Anna's team mimicked dropping her wand and Justin imitated her, keeping his still manacled hands up where Anna could

see them before going into the room and then saying quite loudly, "It's me, Justin Black."

"Slowly take down your hood," Anna demanded, also miming her actions.

Justin did as she said, and then turned around. "You know the drill."

Anna froze Justin from the neck down, and then she had him make an oath before releasing him and fetching his wand.

Getting a pad, she wrote down, "Okay, I believe it's you. Perhaps you should fill me in on what happened."

Justin noticed that Anna's face was far from friendly and his tone was curt as he told her in outline what had happened. "So please be careful with Ignotus."

"I might not like him but I wouldn't kick him while he's down," Anna wrote. "Did he bite you?"

Justin nodded. "Yes."

"Let's get Healer Viking in here," Anna wrote down, leading Justin into her office. "We'll use my office. Take off your cloak."

Justin slowly shed his cloak and, gritting his teeth, rolled up his sleeve. "It doesn't look as though he broke through the skin."

Anna checked Justin's cloak out before again resorting to her pad. "He certainly did some damage though."

Justin could see the sleeve on his cloak was almost torn all the way through. "These are almost impossible to get through. They have basilisk skin woven into them somehow."

"I think Ignotus is going to have a very sore mouth," Anna murmured to herself, not a little gleefully as she used alcohol to wipe down the indentation marks on Justin's arm, before tutting over the bruising on it.

Lucy came hurrying in moments later. "Justin!"

"He can't hear and he's been bitten by a werewolf we now have in custody," Anna said. "The damage looks minimal but even so I wiped his arm down with alcohol."

"Did you touch his bare skin?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll both have to be quarantined next full moon," Lucy said, putting gloves on before she lifted up Justin's arm.

"But the bite didn't break through the skin," Anna said in annoyance.

"You only have to have the tiniest nick, even an invisible-to-the-eye nick, for saliva to penetrate through the skin and into your bloodstream and the bite would have been infectious." Lucy lowered Justin's arm before running her wand over him. "I can't detect any changes in his blood but I won't know for certain until tomorrow. However, even if you come up clean, I'm still going to instigate the quarantine precaution next month."

"Okay."

"Now I'd like to take you over to the hospital ward to examine you."

Justin had no idea of anything that was being said, but when Lucy and Anna gently took an arm each, he allowed himself to be side-apparated into Lucy's office.

Luna, who was acting as Lucy's nurse, rose joyfully to her feet. "Justin!"

"Can't get rid of me, can you?" Justin said, this time able to guess at what Luna had yelled out, before hissing sharply in pain as Lucy and Anna helped him onto the examination table.

Lucy then turned to Anna. "I need you to leave so that I can examine Justin." She smiled at Luna. "You too, Luna. You can return to the ward now. You'll have to see Justin tomorrow."

After the two young women left, Justin was unable to stop himself from blushing as Lucy deftly divested him of his clothing. "You could have warned me!"

Lucy first checked Justin's ears and was easily able to repair the damage that the explosion had wrought. "In answer to your complaint, I need to see what damage has been done to you." She swore softly under her breath. "This cut in your lower groin is a mess, Justin. What were they trying to do to you?"

Justin winced as Lucy began to clean up the rather nasty smelling wound. "Emasculate me it felt like."

Lucy then professionally began to check Justin's other wounds on the front of him before using magic to gently rotate him and check his back. "Only your legs have major damage here although you do have some nasty bruising on your back and buttocks."

"I can thank Venant for that. He used a metal pipe on them when he couldn't get through the cloak by using spells," Justin said as he was reversed to lie on his back again and a sheet drawn up over him. "What's the damage?"

"You're severely dehydrated, suffering from mild malnutrition and you have several broken ribs and a dislocated shoulder as well as numerous smaller cuts, burns and severe spell damage."

"Most of that was Dad's work, although Venant was responsible for the groin injury," Justin said, hissing as Lucy aimed her wand at his ribs, realigning them before, without warning, resetting his arm, making him scream out loud.

"Sirius told us," Lucy said, "right before losing himself at the bottom of a bottle of scotch."

"That sounds like a good idea right now," Justin said, before looking hopefully at Lucy. "Is there any chance?"

"Absolutely not," Lucy said in an officious voice as she handed him a painkiller. "You're going to be placed on bed rest where you'll be on a light, non-alcoholic liquid diet for a day or so to get your stomach used to nutrition again and then we'll think about light foods. If you're feeling better in a week, then I'll let you have a scotch."

"Spoilsport," Justin grumbled.

"Just be grateful you're alive," Lucy said, before asking about Remus. "Is Remus okay?"

"He's fine and dandy," Justin said as Lucy helped him to sit up. "He's the werewolf they have in custody and he'll have to remain there until morning but judging by my own injuries he's definitely going to need medical attention when he changes back." Justin jumped down off the table, wincing as he landed, his knees almost buckling under him. "Where is everyone else? I admit I expected to see more people than just Jameson and her team."

"Everyone's at Potter Place – Anna refused to allow anyone other than Auror and medical personnel in Seashore, just in case anything untoward happened."

"Then I need to get back to Potter Place," Justin said tiredly. "And since I feel rather shaky and don't trust myself to disapparate, I need your help."

Lucy shook her head. "Not until I've finished cleaning up your wounds; so back on the bed for me." Once she had dealt with Justin's wounds, had gotten rid of the used medical supplies and placed a pair of surgical gloves on, she held out her hand. "I'll take you home now."

Potter Place was deathly silent as Lucy apparated them in before releasing Justin's hand, to place an arm around his waist.

On somewhat shaky legs, supported by Lucy, Justin was led towards the kitchen. Upon pushing open the door with his free hand, Justin was greeted by the sound of a breaking mug and Tonks' shocked but relieved face.

"Justin!"

Ron broke into a large smile. "Merlin, mate, I thought we'd lost you."

Tonks went barreling across the room to hug Justin only for Lucy to yell out, "No! He's just had his ribs repaired amongst other things and he also might be contagious."

Both Tonks and Ron looked warily at Justin. "Contagious?"

"He was bitten by Remus but even though it didn't break the skin he still might be contagious so don't touch his bare skin without using a barrier spell or gloves as I'm doing." Lucy helped Justin to sit down. "As I'm on night duty I have to get back. Any problems, let me know."

"I will," Justin said, before smiling at her. "Thanks for patching me up."

"You're welcome." Lucy then vanished.

"Are you hungry?" Tonks asked, hovering at Justin's side, but taking care not to touch him.

"Starving but Lucy has said I should be on a liquid diet."

Ron snorted, the thought of a liquid diet completely disgusting him. "I'll get you some food, mate. None of us fancied it."

Tonks then sat down with a glass of milk after also grabbing herself a plate of pasta while Ron served Justin, his own appetite returning.

"I'm starving."

"You have no idea what being starving means," Justin said with humor tempering his severe voice, tucking gratefully into the food. Once he had finished and had taken another painkilling potion, he let Ron side-apparate him upstairs.

"Neville, Harry and Julian are in Neville's room getting drunk," Tonks informed him after Justin asked after his best friend.

"And is Hermione here?"

"Yes, Harry brought her over – he didn't want her to be alone at a time like this, although she retreated to the bedroom he gave her."

"Let's go see her then," Justin said, deciding to put Harry's former girlfriend out of her misery first as he suspected dealing with Harry might take much longer.

Tonks tapped on the door. "Hermione?"

A tearful voice answered her. "Come in."

Tonks stepped inside to see Hermione lying with a book that had been turned face down on the bed. "I have someone to see you."

Justin stepped around Tonks. "Hey there."

Hermione stared at Justin as if she was imagining things. "Justin?"

"In the flesh," Justin said as he entered the room.

Hermione wiped her face. "I never thought I'd see you again. Remus?"

"He's safe," Justin said, feeling his heart break for Harry at the look on Hermione's face. Harry had told him that he suspected that Hermione still had feelings for Remus and, from the look of relief on Hermione's face, it appeared that his best friend might be correct.

Putting a trembling hand to her mouth, Hermione further confirmed Justin's suspicions as she asked, "Can I see him?"

Justin shook his head. "He's in a cell and hasn't taken Wolfsbane."

"But he'll be okay?"

Justin nodded. "Yes." He then held up a hand as Hermione finally moved across the room but at a pace more sedate than Tonks' own had been. "If you're going to hug me, then make it gentle and don't touch my skin. I'm a little under the weather right now."

Hermione hugged Justin carefully. She could feel him trembling and upset by what he had gone through, she decided to try to move things onto a lighter footing. "You might have also warned me that you smell as though you haven't washed in a month."

"Believe me it feels a darned sight longer," Justin said with a sigh.

Ron grinned at him. "It smells like it too, mate, but I didn't want to say. I think you should take a shower, and then you can tell us all about it."

"I want to see Harry and the others first," Justin said. It was then he noticed all three of them look at each other, Tonks and Ron both realizing what they had forgot to tell Justin. "Harry is okay, isn't he?"

"He's fine, Justin," Hermione said gently. "But..." her voice hitched and she let out a sob, the night having played havoc with her emotions. "But Genevieve Parkinson killed Patrick and Pansy on..." She couldn't go on and Tonks put her arm around her.

"She did it on the night you were taken, mate," Ron said, deciding he had better do the talking. "Neville followed Pansy when she went to warn her father and things went wrong – Neville actually brought Parkinson in for questioning."

"What exactly happened?" Justin asked in a stilted voice.

Ron went into more detail before saying, "Anna found her guilty."

"So she's dead?"

"Harry executed her," Tonks said, handing Hermione a handkerchief.

"I wish he'd made her suffer first," Justin bit out, dashing away his tears with the back of his hand.

"Actually he did," Ron revealed. "Harry used that skin rotting curse on her and Sirius used the Cruciatus Curse– that well pissed Anna off and she had a go at both of them because of it. She, and Sirius and Harry aren't speaking now."

"She wasn't exactly friendly towards me when I got here either," Justin said, before taking a huge deep breath. "I think I could do with a calming potion – I'm going to break down if I don't take one and Harry must have had enough to deal with without my going to pieces on him."

Ron vanished before reappearing with one. "Here."

Justin knocked it back, feeling more centered as it kicked in. "Let's go see Harry."

Once there, Justin opened the door to see Harry sitting in front of the fire on a footstool and Neville and Julian snoring on a sofa, the

earliness of the night and the state of the three men telling Justin that they had probably been drinking all day. "Harry?"

Harry wiped his eyes and turned around. "Justin!"

Ron walked in, grabbing Harry as he swayed forward on the footstool almost plummeting into the fire. "I've got you."

Justin smiled as the stupidly happy look on Harry's face. "You're more than a little drunk, aren't you?"

Far too drunk to stay upright any longer on his own, Harry clung to Ron's waist, his head on Ron's stomach as he began to sob with relief. "I thought you were dead."

Justin gingerly limped across the room and patted Harry on the shoulder. "Well, I'm safe and sound now. So why don't we get you a sobering potion and you can join us."

"Okay," Harry said before slumping unconscious against Ron.

Carefully Ron lowered him to the floor, grabbed a pillow and a blanket and made him comfortable.

Justin swayed somewhat. "Harry's not the only one who needs help tonight. Do you think you could give me a hand to shower, Ron?"

"Yeah. Let's use my room." Ron cast the barrier spell Lucy had warned him to before looping Justin's arm around his neck and putting his own around his waist. "We'll see you in Harry's room."

Half an hour later, a visibly tired Justin was helped into Harry's bedroom.

Luna made him jump, coming up behind him and gently hugging him from behind. "Lucy let me go early. She said I'd be useless if I stayed."

"I'm glad you came."

After pulling away, Justin let Ron help him sit down on a sofa in front of the fire.

Hermione gave Justin a pitying look. "Sirius has told us how bad it's been for you."

"Bad is something of an understatement," Justin said, leaning back against the soft sofa. "I begged him to kill me on more than one occasion."

"We're glad he didn't," Ron said, dropping to the floor to sit next to Tonks.

Tonks nudged Ron in the ribs. "You're hogging my space, Red."

"Live with it," Ron said, but he still moved out of the way so that Tonks wasn't pushed against the mantle and he put his arm around her. He then beamed at Justin. "So, how did you escape?"

The door opened at that point and Sirius walked in, his clothes spattered liberally with blood.

"What happened to you?" Luna asked as she took in his clothing.

"I had a bit of a run-in." Sirius' voice was terse. "A bloody one."

"Is this something to do with my escape?"

"Yes," Sirius said, not quite sure how to tell Justin what had happened. "When you set off the explosive..."

"Explosive?" Ron echoed in amazement.

"I had a stick of Dinky Dynamite in my pocket, which I'd almost forgotten was there. I pulled the ignition tag to set off the stick and it blew a hole in the cage I'd been portkeyed into with Remus."

"It was quite spectacular," Sirius said, having been blown off the dais together with everyone else. "I saw Justin flying out of the cage as I was blown backwards."

"That hurt but it worked, and I thought I'd escaped being bitten, but Remus must have had his heart set on killing me as he clamped down on my arm the moment I operated my emergency portkey."

"That's how you got Remus out?" Hermione asked in surprise. "By letting him bite you?"

"I didn't exactly let him!" Justin said. "Remus was simply attacking the person that had frightened him. Anna blew a hole through him when we arrived but it can't be treated as right now he's locked up in the cells at Seashore."

"How bad is he?" Tonks asked.

"Bad," Sirius said. "You might think Justin looks terrible but as a traitor Remus has been treated a good deal worse. I had to do some rather ad hoc healing simply for him to be up to dealing with Justin and I know he's going to need to take some time to get back on his feet."

"You don't look very happy," Hermione noted. "Did Tom punish you for letting Justin escape?"

Sirius shook his head. "I split my head open when I hit the tree behind me but it wasn't the worst injury your blast inflicted."

"Tom?" Ron asked hopefully.

"If only," Sirius said, before gravely saying, "Tom stupidly brought his pregnant wife to witness the execution."

Justin had a feeling he knew what Sirius was going to say but he hoped he was wrong. He might not have liked Cho but the baby she had been carrying had been an innocent. "Please tell me she was just hurt."

"She wasn't. She was killed, both her and the baby she was carrying," Sirius responded. "She hit the same tree I did – she didn't stand a chance. Tom ripped apart the healer who'd come to help us both when he couldn't save them."

"That the healer's blood on you?"

Sirius nodded at Ron. "Yes, as well as my own."

Justin glanced over to where Hermione had just finished feeding Will. "I might have hated Tom, and Cho, for that matter, but I would never have wished something like that on either of them."

Hermione immediately offered Will up to a pale and obviously stricken Justin. "Do you want to hold him? It might help."

Justin was shaking so badly, he shook his head. "I'm in no fit state to take him."

"I'll take him," Tonks said, already moving to grab the baby, a hungry look on her face. "Come to Aunt Nymie."

Momentarily distracted, Justin looked askance at Tonks. "Aunt Nymie?"

"Aunt Tonks makes me sound about ninety," Tonks said, expertly sliding Will over her shoulder to burp him. "And now that you're checked over, fed and clean and this one is almost settled, I think a full explanation of what happened up to the explosion is in order."

Not wanting to dwell on what had happened to Tom's wife and unborn child, Justin began his story of what Tom had put him through. "There's not much to tell to be truthful. Tom had Sirius and Dae beat the crap out of me, hoping to discover who I was and how I had managed to infiltrate Azkaban."

Sirius interrupted. "I'm just glad they were convinced you were Ignotus."

"On that last day, just before the execution, I almost told Venant who I really was. I really had reached breaking point when you came back in and told him to wind things up."

"He'd have tortured you a good deal more if he'd known and things might not have turned out the way they did," Sirius said, putting his arm around his son. "I'm glad you're back safely."

"But I cost an innocent its life by getting back safely," Justin said, feeling horribly guilty about the unborn child.

Hermione stood up and went to sit by Justin, taking his hand after casting a barrier spell on herself. "Justin, it wasn't your fault. Just as

what happened to Susan Bones, to my mother or to Pansy and her father wasn't your fault. It was Tom's fault for taking a pregnant woman to witness something like that."

"Logically I know that but it doesn't stop me feeling bad about it."

"I know, but you can't turn back time..."

"I could but I don't have a time-turner."

"And we wouldn't let you go back even if you did," Sirius told him. "Justin, it really isn't your fault and it's given us an advantage – we know now that family might be Tom's weak spot, and using Darius might..."

"We're not using his son against him no matter what happens," Justin interrupted hurriedly. "One innocent's blood on my hands is enough."

"Not even if it helps us win?" Ron asked.

"Not even then," Justin said, although he knew deep down that it might well be very different if he was faced with the situation at some time in the future. The whole night suddenly became too much for him and he slumped forward, murmuring, "Not even then."

Sirius stood up. "I think it's time Justin went to bed."

Hermione helped Justin to his feet and back to the room they had prepared for him, helping Sirius settle him in. "Goodnight, Justin."

"Goodnight." Justin let go of Hermione's hand as he lay against the pillows.

Hermione then spoke to Sirius. "I'm going over to Seashore. I want to be there for Remus."

"I'll join you once I've cleaned up and made sure Justin is okay," Sirius said, hoping to be able to check on his best friend.

As Hermione left, Sirius sat down on the edge of Justin's bed. "Justin, I'm sorry, I should have tried to get you out sooner."

"I thought we'd already discussed this. You did what you had to do to preserve your identity."

"I almost gave myself away just as Tom activated your portkey," Sirius divulged. "If Tom hadn't said goodbye, I'd have stepped in."

"I'm glad you didn't," Justin said truthfully. "Even though I might end up being a werewolf if I'm really unlucky, at least Remus and I are both out." He fingered his heir ring. "If I am a werewolf then you'll need this back."

"Justin, you're my heir, werewolf or not."

Justin yawned, not wanting to think about the possibility. "I feel so tired."

"After what we put you through I'm not surprised," Sirius said, pulling a pile of potions out of his pocket. "Take these now."

Justin did as he was told, his eyes quickly starting to droop. "Sedative?"

"Yes, and there's more pain..." Sirius' voice trailed off as Justin lurched forward. Gently pushing him backwards, he tugged up the covers. "Goodnight, son."

Totally out of it, Justin slept on, oblivious of what was going on around him as Sirius checked out his arm, frowning at the state of it, before leaving the room.

The Next Morning

Remus was unable to stem the tears that were running down his cheeks as his transformation ended nor was he able to hold back his screams, screams that those in Seashore had had to listen to all night, including Hermione.

She had been joined by Sirius as promised and, upon hearing his friend's agonizing screams, he had tried to get into the cell, only to have to withdraw as Remus had almost mauled him when he had attempted to open the steel door to stun his friend to try to treat him.

Now, after checking his watch and realizing the transformation back into human form should be complete, Sirius yanked open the door to the room and ran in, a lightweight sheet in his hand that he quickly draped over Remus. "We need to get you to onto a bed."

For one moment Remus didn't seem to recognize Sirius and he unconsciously recoiled.

Seeing this, Hermione rushed into the room, dropping to the floor and taking Remus' hand. "You're safe, Remus. I promise you, you're safe now."

Only then did Remus sag forward, and also grabbing his hand, Sirius apparated the three of them to the hospital wing, Remus screaming out in pain as they arrived. "I'm sorry, Remus."

"Just kill me," Remus begged, finally recognizing Sirius. "If you've ever cared about me, kill me."

Shoving Hermione to one side, Lucy came dashing over, together with Sirius running her wand over Remus. "Shit! He's got silver nitrate in his system and a lot of it."

"Venant!" Sirius hissed as he hurried over to the potions they had prepared earlier in the week when Dae had started using the substance on Remus.

A slightly green and very hungover Harry apparated in at that moment. "What's going on?"

Hermione turned to Harry. "They used silver nitrate on Remus."

Sirius leant over his friend. "Remus, I'm sorry but I'm going to have to use the antidote on you."

"Don't want it again," Remus wept, having undergone it twice after the first time when Venant had used silver nitrate on him. "Kill me."

Standing watching, Hermione stood and wept as well, the torture of seeing Remus in so much pain almost ripping her in two, and Harry put his arm around her and pulled against him as she cried.

"Secure him," Sirius ordered as he uncorked the potion. "I'm sorry, Remus, but this is going to hurt worse than anything you've gone through before."

Remus had attempted to move but Lucy had been too quick and now chains held him in place on the reinforced bed. He therefore closed his mouth, but when Sirius pinched his nose he had no choice but to open his mouth again and, with Lucy rubbing his throat, he automatically swallowed when he would have preferred to spit out the potion.

Then he began screaming and contorting before he finally went silent.

Sirius ran his wand over him. "Fuck, he not's breathing!"

"Revivio!" Lucy screamed out as she aimed her wand at Remus' heart.

Lucy repeated this seven times, each time with no response, while Hermione sobbed in the corner and Harry watched almost numbly.

Sirius eventually put a hand on Lucy's shoulder. "Call it, Lucy."

"I'm not going to let this son of a bitch die now," Lucy barked out, shaking off Sirius' hand. "Stand back."

All four of them closed their eyes as a bright light leapt from Lucy's wand and into Remus' chest, the smell of burning flesh making them all gag, and Remus' body lifted up from the table, the chains preventing him from arching fully before he began screaming again before mercifully passing out.

Lucy hurried to treat the burn that covered his chest as Hermione asked, "Will he make it?"

"Not now!" Sirius snapped, not having time to offer words of comfort to Hermione. He nodded to Lucy. "You start at the bottom and I'll work from the top. Treat him without pain meds – I don't want anything else in his system and I doubt he'll come to, no matter what we do to him."

As they treated Remus, Hermione sobbing in Harry's arm, Lucy could see that Sirius was beginning to relax and she therefore repeated Hermione's earlier question. "Do you think he'll make it?"

"Yes," Sirius said. "I suspect this was deliberately set to go off last night as he transformed and it would have taken some time to circulate around his system. They obviously wanted to make sure Remus suffered one way or another. And speaking of Tom and Venant, I've got to get back and begin an interrogation with them."

"Who of?" Hermione asked, hiccupping as she slowly stopped crying.

"Everyone who has been guarding Remus and Justin – Tom thinks one of them helped Justin to acquire a portkey, and given that he was able to get through the wards, he also thinks that he was a Death Eater and he wants to try and work out who," Sirius said. "Luckily, at least for me, after what I did to Justin, Tom doesn't suspect me."

Hermione moved closer when Lucy beckoned to her. "Can I touch him?"

"You can hold his hand but take care not to jolt him."

As Hermione took Remus' hand, Harry tersely asked, "What will happen to the guards?"

"Even though they're going to be unable to tell me or Venant anything, we'll torture them for a while before I expect Tom will hand out the same punishment I believe he had intended for Remus: they'll be hung, drawn and quartered. And given that Venant obviously had to be the one who doctored Remus with the silver nitrate, I suspect they wanted him to suffer even more than that."

Lucy was horrified at what Sirius was implying. "You mean they'd have cured him as we've done and then done that to him?"

"Yes, and since he was in a cage, they wouldn't have had the same problem we did of getting close to him to take him out and administer the antidote sooner. I don't think this was intended to kill him, merely to cause severe pain."

Hermione looked down at Remus' face and said angrily, "I hope you hurt them as badly as they've hurt him."

Sirius finally lowered his wand after running more diagnostics and made a promise to Hermione. "Believe me I will."

Lucy moved around the table, her own work done, and she took Sirius' hands in her own. "I know this bothers you despite the fact you want revenge."

"It does bother me a little, but given that I suspect I could have been doing it to Remus, I'd rather be doing it to Tom's men than to my friend. Either way, I think I might have blown my cover if I had had to go as far as gutting Remus."

"Even so, you wouldn't have blown your cover," Lucy said, disagreeing. "You managed to hold back on saving Justin and did whatever you had to, just as Justin and Remus went through what they did because they were doing the same."

"Then why do I feel so guilty?" Sirius asked.

"Because you'd be Tom if you didn't," Harry said in a matter of fact voice.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like shit," Harry said, his head pounding. "And I suspect that Justin isn't feel too good again. He was being sick when I went in there before coming here. I told Tonks I'd fetch one of you to look at him."

"I'll do it, and then I have to head back to Tom's place," Sirius said. "I don't just have interrogations to carry out. Tom wants me to prepare the... Cho for her funeral."

"I actually feel sorry for him," Lucy admitted, having been horrified when she had learnt what had happened. "But no-one in their right mind would have taken a pregnant woman to view a murder."

"No-one said Tom was in his right mind," Sirius reminded her. "Will you be okay?"

"I'll have to be."

After hugging both women and Harry, Sirius headed off to check on Justin, who thankfully, in spite of his upset stomach, was showing no signs of having been infected by Remus.

Next Chapter: Harry surprises Remus; Harry's darker side comes out.

Chapter 74: Collateral Damage

14th April 2001

His sleeping son tucked against his shoulder, as he sat down Harry smiled at Remus, who still looked terrible. "Sirius said you were finally up to visitors."

"I was up to visitors two days ago," Remus growled, although it wasn't entirely true.

"I hear that Hermione has been constantly at your bedside."

Remus' scowl vanished and his face unconsciously softened. "Yes, she has."

"So when are you going to tell her that you're in love with her?"

Remus was taken aback by the question but he answered honestly. "I'm not, Harry. You know as well as I do that..."

"I know that she wants to be with you more than she probably knows," Harry said, having seen the state of his former girlfriend on the day Remus had almost died. "And I think it's time you two had a talk about it."

"That's not going to happen."

"Why not?"

"Because of something..." Remus hesitated before saying, "Because of something Pansy said to me on the day Will was born."

"What was it?"

"That it would break your heart if I made a move on Hermione."

Harry smiled as he thought about Pansy and her defense of him. "Pansy was a good wife."

"You miss her, don't you?" Remus asked, grateful to move away from topic of Hermione.

"Every day," Harry admitted honestly. "We might not have been in love but that doesn't mean that she didn't make me happy and vice versa. And while we both knew we weren't destined to be together, I can honestly say that I'm glad I married her and I'm grateful beyond words for my son. And it's him I need to concentrate on right now. So, I'm going to say it again. Talk to Hermione."

"It wouldn't work, Harry."

"It will work if you make it work," Harry said. "My marriage to Pansy was evidence of that. It was something neither of us wanted at the start but we got by."

"Then why the divorce?"

"Because although we loved each other, we weren't in love with each other," Harry said. "And that's what we both wanted for each other."

"Harry, I know you're still in love with Hermione yourself."

"Yes, but I also know that even though a small part of her will always be mine, I squandered my chance with her. And if Pansy's death has taught me anything, it's that life is too short not to take every opportunity we're given. Don't throw away your chance to be with Hermione as I did, Remus."

"But it would still make you unhappy."

"Yes, it would but it would make me even unhappier if Hermione wasn't happy and I don't believe being with me would make her happy, but I suspect being with you would."

"I'm still not sure I'm the right person for her or that she even feels that way about me."

"You have to talk to her."

"If I do and she doesn't show any sign of being interested will you drop the subject?"

"Yes."

The Next Day

Remus rolled over in bed to find Hermione sitting dozing in the chair beside him. "You could have slept on here with me – it's almost three in the morning."

"I didn't want to hurt you."

"Hermione, I'm not made of glass," Remus said in aggravation. "So stop treating me as if I am."

Hermione's eyes teared up as Remus snapped at her. "I'll let you get some sleep then."

Remus reached out and grabbed her hand. "I'm sorry I'm being such a grouch. I'm just a little frustrated that everyone is treating me as if I'm going to break. Stay."

He then got up and walked over to the bathroom, smiling at the fact that Hermione looked anywhere at him, even though he was wearing boxer shorts. When he returned ten minutes he was wearing a robe similar to Hermione's and his hair was wet.

"You took a shower on your own?" Hermione asked as she came back into the bedroom with a plate of sandwiches and two glasses of milk.

"Hermione...!" Remus growled.

"Sorry," Hermione said before handing over the plate of sandwiches. "Macclesby made those for you. He also thinks you still need taking care of."

"I am hungry," Remus admitted before stretching and wincing slightly. "And if I'm honest, I still do ache a little but not enough that I don't want you to sit next to me and help me eat these sandwiches."

The two of them munched their way through the food, Remus polishing off most of it before he sank back against his pillows. "I feel almost normal again."

"Are you sure? Today you seemed, well, not yourself."

"Harry dropped by this morning."

Hermione immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion. "Did he say something to upset you?"

"Quite the opposite actually; he said he wants me to be happy."

"Oh!"

"And he also said he wants the same for you as well."

"Oh!" Hermione couldn't think of anything else to say.

Remus took Hermione's hand and linked his fingers through hers. "Hermione, if I ask you a question, will you answer me honestly?"

"Of course."

"How do you feel about Harry?"

"Are you asking if I want him back?"

"Yes, because even with what's happened to Pansy, he would take you back tomorrow if that's what you wanted."

Hermione looked down at her hand where it was linked with Remus. "I don't want that, not anymore." She looked over at him. "Did he ask you to ask me?"

"No, but he did ask me to talk to you."

"Why?"

"Because he believes that you have feelings for me."

Hermione went deep red. "Remus, you know as well as I do that we tried that once and it didn't work out, and I know that although you let me come back to live here that you don't like me like that anymore, and you know that I..."

Remus knew that Harry was right as Hermione blustered on and he stopped her mid-sentence. "Hermione, it's okay. Take a deep breath."

Hermione did as he said before saying, "Sorry."

"Don't be," Remus said, tightening his grip slightly. "Hermione, Harry thinks we should give our relationship a second chance."

Hermione brought up one of the points she had just mentioned. "But you don't see me like that anymore."

"Actually I do, and you're the reason I broke up with Tab."

"Sorry," Hermione repeated.

"Once again, don't be. It was the right thing to do. In fact Tab herself said I was an idiot who should never have dated her in the first place and that she could never live up to you."

"There isn't much to live up to," Hermione said in disbelief at what she was hearing. "The last time we dated I was still in love with someone else, something I didn't tell you."

"Can you really tell me you realized how you still felt about Harry when you were dating me?"

"I didn't, but that doesn't change the fact that I hurt you, and I think you should look somewhere else than to me for your next relationship."

"I've tried and, as Tab pointed out to me, she's not what I'm looking for."

Hermione's stomach did a flip-flop at the way Remus was looking at her. "Perhaps you're just looking in the wrong places."

"Or perhaps I'm not," Remus pulled Hermione towards him.

"Remus, things didn't work out last time," Hermione protested, although she didn't try to pull away.

Feeling encouraged, Remus went on. "That's because you still had feelings for Harry, and I'm well aware that you probably always will have some sort of feelings for him but as long as they're just fond memories then I can deal with them."

"Is that your way of saying you can deal with the remnants of what I once felt for Harry?"

"As long as that's all it is," Remus said, being completely open about his feelings. "I couldn't bear to have my heart stomped on again."

"And I couldn't bear to put you through that again."

"So, are you willing to give us a second chance?"

"I don't know, Remus. What if it goes wrong again?"

Remus gently pulled Hermione closer. "If it goes wrong then we'll deal with it, just as we dealt with it last time."

Hermione closed her eyes as Remus dipped his head down and kissed her. Within moments the kiss had gone from a gentle caress to a fiery maelstrom of tamped down feelings.

When Hermione opened her eyes again, she was feeling somewhat dazed. "Good gracious!"

Remus was similarly blown away. "I might say the same."

Her hands shaking, Hermione moved away from him. "I think a little distance might be a good idea."

"Or you could join me in bed."

"Don't you think that's rushing things a little?"

"You're nervous about sleeping with me, aren't you?"

"Yes," Hermione said shakily. "We didn't sleep together last time and we'd been dating for months."

"Because you always held back," Remus said, before bringing up the reason why. "I suspect it was because you were still in love with Harry and that's also why that kiss we just shared was different – you're truly ready to move on."

"But I'm not sure I'm quite ready to sleep with you yet."

"Then we'll wait," Remus said, although he wanted nothing more than to take Hermione into his arms and make love to her.

"We can talk about the book," Hermione said, latching onto a safe subject as she spotted the book on the table where she had left it.

Remus let go of her so that she could pick up the book, before patting the bed again.

Sitting so close to Remus, Hermione tried flicking to the part of the book where she had thought to herself that she wanted to discuss it with Remus but her hands were shaking too much. "Oh hell!"

Remus reached over and took the book away from her. "I feel the same way."

Hermione's heart began to clatter as Remus kissed her again, his tongue sliding into her mouth and the passion behind the kiss leaving her in no doubt as to what he wanted. His tugging her against him to lie down also went a long way to convincing her of what he wanted and she gave a slight moan as he cupped her breast, his hand snaking inside of her robe.

Hermione's eyes flew open when Remus' hand quickly left her breast and slid down her body to settle between her legs but wanting his touch she parted them slightly, allowing him better access.

Feeling Hermione quiver when he touched her, Remus began to rub gently until he could feel how aroused she had become and Hermione was moaning softly into his mouth. Moving so that he was fully covering her, Remus didn't break off the kiss, instead tugging aside his robe and pushing Hermione's up to her waist.

Hermione gave a startled cry as she felt Remus slide in and she was half afraid it was going to be too much. But then he slid back out and back in, and slowly her body began to relax to accommodate him until he slid all the way in, shaking a little as he did so, Hermione's tightness enveloping him like a hot glove.

Remus then stilled, more for his own benefit than for Hermione's. A few moments later, Hermione's mewl of protest made him realize

that he was probably crushing her and he should be doing more than simply just lying there, savoring the feeling.

Remus half wished he'd stayed still for a moment longer as it was over very quickly for both of them, Hermione already close to the edge before he had begun making love to her and for him it had been a while since he had made love.

Neither said much for a few minutes afterwards, Remus supporting his weight on his elbows as he got his breath back. "I didn't quite intend for our first time to be like that. I'd imagined dinner, roses and a long drawn out affair."

"To be honest, I think the lack of warning or planning was probably a better option," Hermione admitted in a somewhat dazed voice.

Hermione then gave a startled murmur as she felt Remus growing inside of her again and he smiled. "Yes, I am going to make love to you again and more slowly this time." When Hermione blushed a deep shade of red, Remus kissed her nose. "First of all I have something to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Do you know about werewolves and mating?"

Hermione nodded, although her cheeks were fiery red as she did. "Yes."

"I thought you would," Remus said, stroking her breast and gently rolling her nipple between his finger and thumb. "Hermione, although I know it's not going to happen tonight or even anytime soon, you need to know that there might come a time when I mark you."

"Mark me?"

"I thought you knew about mating."

"I read the bits about werewolves rarely having more than one serious mate but then it started to get a little sexual and so I skipped that part," Hermione told him. "I never imagined I'd need that sort of information, at least not for a school assignment."

"And here I was thinking you read everything," Remus teased.

"Okay, I felt uncomfortable reading about it," Hermione admitted. "And I had Ron giggling about it at the time when we were doing the coursework."

"Then you should know that if a werewolf falls so deeply in love that he believes his partner will be his mate for life and he believes she feels the same way, then he will mark her by biting her."

Hermione was rather nervous about this. "I expect it hurts then."

"It does apparently," Remus confirmed, moving his hand from Hermione's breast to stroke her face. "But when he was still alive, Destin Simon told me that it's important, particularly as it might save your life if I was ever to change and you were there."

"But I thought a werewolf would attack anything."

Remus now admitted to a former breach in his own knowledge.

"As did I, until Destin told me differently. And he also marked his children, although he never needed it as he was never around when he changed."

As Remus mentioned children, he sensed that Hermione had begun to feel even more uncomfortable than she already was. "But that is a long way off. Right now I have other things on my mind." He smiled as Hermione's flush reasserted itself. "Now where was I...?"

15th September 2001

Harry could barely hear anything but the blood rushing through his veins as he stood angrily over the man who had hurt his friend.

It took Justin several attempts to get through to Harry. "Harry, you have to stop, Harry!"

Harry turned around in a daze and saw Justin, Neville and Sirius standing there. "What?"

Justin let out a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness. We didn't dare come closer until you'd stopped, well, killing him."

Still not quite himself, Harry looked down in shock at the bloody mess at his feet. "I did that?"

"Yes," Sirius said as he began to examine the unconscious man.

Harry gave a shuddering sigh before his mouth became set. "I'm not going to apologize for it. He deserved it."

"I'm not so sure Luna is going to see it that way."

"Do you see it that way?"

"Yes," Justin said, backing Harry to the hilt as he always did.

Neville too agreed, although with reservations. "You don't ever hit a woman, well, not unless it was someone like Parkinson but you did go a little bit too far."

"He's scum, Neville," Harry said, hearing the cracks around him of what he presumed would be Aurors. "And I'm not apologizing for what I've done."

Trainee Auror Sophia Viking had to do a double take at the sight in front of her. "Merlin, Harry, what have you done?"

"He hit Luna, Sophia," Harry said in a grim voice. "And nobody touches my friends."

"You do know we're going to have to arrest you, don't you, Mr. Potter?" Sophia's companion asked.

Harry shrugged. "Be my guest."

Remus joined Harry in his cell. "Harry, what the hell were you thinking?"

"I wasn't," Harry said truthfully. "When Luna admitted that the bruise on her cheek came from Hufflepuff because he blamed her for losing the baby, I just literally saw red. I don't really remember much until after Justin arrived, just bits and pieces."

Remus was far from surprised. "To be honest I expected you to blow up long before now, ever since I told you that Hermione and I had gotten married in fact."

"You think I'm angry because she married you?"

"Yes, Harry, I do."

Harry sagged. "I suppose I am but I thought I'd be happy if she was happy too."

"But you're not, are you?"

"No, Remus, I'm not, not at all, and it kills me that I couldn't be the one to make her feel loved."

"Fuck, Harry, I'm sorry. I..."

"Have done nothing wrong, Remus," Harry assured him. "I chose to push you two together again; I wanted her to be happy and marrying you made her happy; and I thought it was what I wanted, even though it wasn't. It's my bed and I've got to lie in it." Harry then abruptly changed the subject. "So when's my trial?"

"Tomorrow and I can promise you that Jameson's gunning for you."

"I thought she might be."

"Luna has tried to talk her around but she's not backing down."

"Luna put in a good word for me?"

"Yes, Harry, even though she was upset at what you did, she still defended you." Remus then passed on some good news. "And you should know that she's still pregnant. While Lucy confirmed that Luna had lost a baby, its twin is still hanging in there but the Muggle doctors must have missed it."

"Please tell me she's not going to go back to Hufflepuff now."

"She won't. She's already asked me to put in motion a divorce and obliviation once he recovers from the beating you gave him. Luna

said she won't stay with a man who hits a woman and especially one who can't deal with her magical status."

"So how long do you think I'll get for what I did?"

"One month."

Harry snorted. "Jameson isn't going to let me off that lightly and you know it."

"Under normal circumstances I think she'd have locked you up and thrown away the key, but I pointed out that we're at war and you're an invaluable member of my team and we need you."

"I still don't believe she simply backed off."

"She didn't. I agreed you'd work for her for one day per month for the next year as sort of what the Muggles call community service."

Harry could imagine how much Anna would enjoy that. "I'd rather rot in this cell."

"If you don't take the plea bargain, you'll have to serve six months, Harry."

"Then I'll see you in six months."

"Harry, don't do this. Think of Will."

"I am," Harry said, his face completely serious. "As much as I still believe Hufflepuff deserved every blow I inflicted upon him, I lost it, Remus. I mean utterly and totally lost it so badly that I hardly remember anything."

Remus could sense Harry's fear. "You're afraid that you somehow let Voldemort out, aren't you?"

"Even though the spell was supposed to absorb him, I think that's exactly what might have happened."

"Harry, if that had happened, you wouldn't have remembered anything at all, and not just little bits as you said."

"Okay, maybe you're right, but I scared myself if I'm being honest and until I'm certain I'm safe to be around, I'd rather be locked up here."

"You're positive?"

"Yes, but if anything changes with Tom, then pull rank, otherwise I'm staying here."

"What about Will?"

"I know it's a bit much to ask but would you and Hermione mind taking care of him for me?" Harry then realized it was probably asking too much. "But if you feel you can't, don't worry about it. I'm sure Tonks will gladly take him."

"I suspect he's going to become involved in a battle as to who gets to look after him. We all love him, Harry, so don't worry, he'll be taken good care of."

"Thanks."

Anna was hardly surprised when Remus relayed Harry's message. "Doesn't he realize how much help he could be to us?"

"No, he simply sees your demand as a way of getting back at him for throwing his weight around when I was being held prisoner by Tom."

Anna went red. "Does he really think I'd be that petty?"

"Yes, and come to think of it, so do I," Remus said, able to feel Anna's discomfort. "And while I truly believe he needs a little time to get his head together, I don't agree he should be serving six months."

"He nearly killed a man."

"I know and it's nothing I haven't done myself in the heat of the moment."

"Don't tell me, your Ignotus bailed you out."

"He did and don't think for a second that I won't do the same for Harry when I believe he's had enough time to calm down."

Anna was far from happy with Remus' highhandedness. "Why even bother with a trial? Why even bother with BritAD for that matter? You act as if you're above the law, Lupin."

"I beg to differ, Jameson. If I was acting above the law, Harry would be standing here now."

"But it's an empty gesture. You've just told me that you can pull him out at any time by throwing his Unspeakable status in my face."

"If I was as bad as you're making out, I'd have simply yanked his butt of his cell the moment you locked him up. I've followed the letter of the law."

"Let's see, shall we, how closely you follow the letter of the law when I tell you that for Potter any bargaining is over now that he's refused my offer. I'm going for the maximum sentence, no time off for good behavior, no visitors' privileges, no special services, nothing."

"I'll simply take him out of here if you do that."

"You can't do that. He has to pay to the price for what he's done, just as Hufflepuff should have done. Potter had no right at all to take justice into his own hands."

"And what about you turning the other cheek about what I did to Snape because he raped your sister? By rights you should have demanded that I surrender myself but you didn't because it involved a member of your family."

Anna could hardly deny this. "Okay, I should have done it but this is different. Harry isn't a member of your family."

"As far as I'm concerned he is."

"I'm sorry but I'm not backing down."

"In that case I'm going to collect Harry now and I'm writing off the charges against him."

"You can't do that!"

"In a time of war I can act for the Minister for Magic if he's dead or incapacitated. And since he's dead, that's what I'm doing by pardoning Harry. I'm also going to relocate the Unspeakables off-site. However, since I don't wish to penalize your men, I'm not going to relocate the medical facilities or any leisure areas. However, they will be open to my men."

Anna stiffly agreed. "Fine. And please tell your wife she's fired."

"Gladly." Remus then turned his wand on Anna. "Obliviate." She was left with no idea that Remus headed the Unspeakables, nor of any other operative in his group.

Harry was surprised to be told he was being released and once back in his rooms, he questioned Remus as to it. "What happened?"

Remus told him. "...and so I think I've irrevocably ended any chance of working amicably with BritAD."

"What happens over joint operations?"

"The same as before. We'll liaise and I'll lead the operation."

"Does Jameson know this yet?"

"No, but she won't have any choice if she wants to remain where she is."

"Would you really pull rank and fire her?"

"No. Her men like and respect her and even though we can't along, it doesn't mean I should take that away from her."

"She fired Hermione."

"Hermione wouldn't have been there for much longer anyway, not with a baby on the way."

"How is she feeling? I haven't seen her more or less since you got married."

"You feel up to talking about her after what you said this morning?"

"If you're asking if I'm over my pity party, then the answer is yes."

Remus gave Harry an annoyed look. "Harry, I never thought you pitied yourself."

"Well, I did, and I can assure you it's over. So how is she?"

"Blaming me for getting her pregnant."

"Not a glowing mother then?"

Remus laughed as he thought about his wife's complaints. "Not even the slightest bit. She's still being sick all of the time, her back hurts, she's constantly craving pickled onions and she's shot down every single name I've come up for the baby."

"And yet you're still smiling."

"Because when I hold your son I can imagine how wonderful it's going to be to have a child of my own."

Thinking of Will made Harry confess, "I'm genuinely afraid to be around him."

"Because of what you did?"

Harry nodded. "Yes."

"I can still take him while you get your head together," Remus offered. "As it is, I'm going to give you a choice. Despite releasing you from Jameson's clutches, you should pay some sort of price for what you did, so you can either spend a month here under house arrest or you can take on an assignment."

"What is it?"

"I need to find somewhere else to house the Unspeakables; somewhere big enough to house up to fifty if it ever became necessary."

"So somewhere like Seashore?"

"That would be good but I don't want to have to penalize Muggles this time, if at all possible."

"Then I'm your man."

23rd January 2002

Harry put down the newspaper. "I can't believe he's finally made a move on the Muggle world."

"Their government didn't stand a chance," Remus said having gone in to survey the damage, Tom succeeding where Guy Fawkes had failed.

"I wonder if this is why Sirius went missing," Harry said.

"I expect Tom put his house in order and under lockdown, at least I hope that's why Sirius has been gone," Remus responded.

"Well, we know he's not dead," Justin said, lifting up his hand. "My heir ring would have vanished."

"True." Harry picked up the newspaper again. "So what do we do now?"

"We keep working on our plans with BritAD, USAD and AusAD to infiltrate every level of government we can," Remus said.

"At least Jameson has stopped stonewalling you now."

"I have a little confession to make," Remus said, looking a little shamefaced. "I threatened to kick her out of BritAD and put Tab in her place."

"Would you have really done that?" Justin asked in surprise.

"No. As I told Harry quite some time ago, Jameson is well respected by her peers but I had to make her believe I would do it if she didn't co-operate. It helps that she now has no idea who's behind my hood and therefore has nothing to base her decisions upon except for past history."

"What would help more is to get a report back from Sirius."

As Remus was finishing his sentence, Sirius apparated in. "Did I hear my name?"

Justin rose to his feet, his face wreathed in a smile. "Dad!"

"It never fails to thrill me to hear you call me that," Sirius said as he pulled his son into a hug. "How are you doing?"

"We're all fine. We were more concerned about you."

Sirius confirmed that Tom had done as Remus had suspected and gone into lockdown. "He knows someone is betraying him but he hasn't been able to figure out who. Even with the lockdown over, I'm still going to pass on information to you but tell you what he has told me in confidence so you can decide if you want to risk exposing me or not."

"You have some information now?" Remus asked, able to feel Sirius' concern.

"Yes. Tom's next target is Heathrow Airport, the Muggle side of the airport, and it's going to be big. He won't however be announcing the attack until on the actual day."

"So if we have some sort of resistance in place, he'll know it was you."

"I'd definitely fall under suspicion given that I was the only one in Tom's Inner Circle who was friends with the fictional Gareth."

"We have to protect your identity at all costs."

Harry was far from happy with this. "Remus, you can't seriously expect us to sit back and let Tom slaughter innocent Muggles."

"How many of his side is he going to use?" Justin asked.

"Around two hundred Death Eaters."

"Then I'm afraid we have to take a back seat this time," Remus said in a grave voice. "Given our current efforts to infiltrate Tom's

organization throughout the world, we just don't have the numbers to defend against that many Death Eaters."

"But..."

Justin was to surprise his best friend as he interrupted him. "Harry, Remus is right."

"You're the last person I ever thought would say that. Your mother is a Muggle."

"I know but you're not looking at the bigger picture. If we make a move to try to stop him at Heathrow, not only will Sirius be compromised, but we'll lose men we can't afford to."

"And what about the Muggles?"

"They're collateral damage," Justin said, although like Remus he sounded grave.

Harry stared at Justin, unable to believe what his friend had just said. "Collateral damage? How the fuck can you stand there so calmly and say that when you know hundreds, maybe thousands of Muggles might die?"

"Because if we don't make this sacrifice, then millions might die, Harry," Justin argued. "The weaker we are the longer it will take us to get ourselves in position to make a move against Tom. As it is, it's going to take months – if we make a move on Heathrow it could take years."

"But you know he's not going to stop at Heathrow, is he?" As Harry asked the question he threw Sirius a glance.

Sirius confirmed Harry's question. "No, he's not. He's intending to hit every large airport here in the UK as well as the major ports and the train tunnel that goes to France."

"That will cripple the Muggle transportation system," Harry said in horror. "He's going to make it so that people can't flee, isn't he?"

"Yes," Sirius said. "Ideally he'd love to make the British Isles a secure stronghold but we know that will never work, although Tom is going to do his best to make it happen."

"What about foreign countries?" Remus asked.

"They'll be next, first the US and then Australia."

"I have to bring Mum home," Justin said.

"What happened to collateral damage?" Harry asked, his voice filled with sarcasm.

Remus held up a hand before an argument could ensue between the two friends. "You made your point with Justin but I'm still right, Harry. We have to look at the bigger picture even if it means that things are going to get shitty for a while."

"I know," Harry finally acknowledged, slumping into his favorite brown leather armchair. "But it's so fucking frustrating being able to do nothing."

"We're not doing nothing," Remus said. "We're infiltrating every magical Ministry that Tom has set up because of you and your ability to inflict a Dark Mark. And when the time is right, we're going to make a unified move against Tom and his men."

"Well, I know of a possible move we could try before then," Sirius said.

All three men turned to look at him, Harry raising an eyebrow. "And?"

"Cam, as I predicted, has finally slept her way to the top and she's pregnant with Tom's child. He's therefore going to do the right thing and marry her."

"Are you okay?" Harry asked.

"I expected our liaison wouldn't be of a permanent nature, so yes, I'm fine," Sirius assured Harry before going on. "They're getting married in a couple of days and we won't be able to do anything then. But after the baby's born..."

"No!" Justin interrupted. "I said when I caused the death of one baby..."

Harry in turn interrupted Justin. "But it would be collateral damage, Justin."

"The two of you, stop it!" Remus barked out. "I want to hear what Sirius has to say."

"Cam is intending to hold the baby's christening at her parents' home in July. They've asked me to be her godfather and I was thinking that you could plan a raid and take the baby, hold it to ransom in exchange for Tom."

Remus shot down this idea. "No go. Tom would suspect you and we need you where you are. As much as it grieves me to say it, our best option is to wait until we're all in position and an opportune time comes when we can make a strike as one."

Next Chapter: Remus has a change of heart.

Note: Things will still be slow to post, although this is no longer on hiatus.

Chapter 75: A Risky Maneuver

Justin put down the phone. "She's still not answering it. I have to go over there."

Remus vetoed Justin's desire. "You can't, Justin. If we're going to mount an assault on Heathrow, then we need every man we have, to say nothing of the fact that you're one of our best duelers and bear the Dark Mark."

Justin had to reluctantly agree to Remus' order. "Yes, Sir."

Harry squeezed Justin's arm. "She's probably just on holiday."

Justin blew out his breath. "With Dudley?"

Dudley, who still lived with Cordelia and Lester, had also not picked up the phone.

"I'm sorry, Justin, but right now we have bigger concerns than your mother," Remus said in an apologetic voice. "Hoods up."

The little group then apparated to Barnstable Towers, the small manor house Harry had tracked down for Remus to base the Unspeakables in. Once there, Remus began to bark out orders.

"Amicus, you'll take the Beta team. Risus, you're with me. Lighthouse..."

Once everyone had been reminded of their assignments, they disappeared, joining the four teams of Aurors that had also hastily been put together after Remus had had a change of heart about Heathrow. Then, after casting the Fidelius charm on several stores in Heathrow that were glass fronted and afforded them a good view of the proceedings, Remus and his team leaders obliterated those in the stores before sending them on their way.

Harry watched as the customers and servers alike left to head home, heading out of the doors and towards the public transport that lay outside. "At least we've managed to save someone."

Remus knew how much it irritated Harry that they couldn't do more. "Risus, we have finite resources. We can't help everyone."

"I know and it's not a moment too soon," Harry remarked as the sound of gunfire reached their ears. "It looks as though Tom's arrived."

Both men watched, the Alpha team waiting for the signal to go, but it was a signal Remus was never going to give.

Harry whistled softly as he watched what looked like hundreds of Death Eaters streaming in. "I thought our friend said it would be about two hundred."

"Tom obviously decided not to take any chances with the Muggle security carrying weapons," Remus said, his heart sinking at the sheer numbers of Death Eaters that were marching up the corridor in front of them. "We have to abort."

Harry had to agree. To move on so many Death Eaters would be suicidal. "I'll let the other teams know. Do you want me to start ferrying our people out?"

Remus shook his head, aware how tired Harry, and the few of them who bore the Dark Mark, would get trying to disapparate over a hundred and fifty Aurors and Unspeakables out of the airport. "No, we'll wait but we'll have to put up barrier spells in case he attempts to bring the building down or sets it on fire."

"I'll inform Bill Weasley," Harry said as he vanished, reappearing in the store next door.

After filling Bill in on what they needed, Harry also informed Anna they were aborting, something she'd already anticipated but found frustrating.

"So we simply just have to stand here and watch them kill innocent Muggles."

"I want to help too but it would be insane to go out there, Commander," Harry said to her, able to see her frustration at being able to do nothing.

Suddenly Justin let out a loud exclamation. "Oh shit!"

Harry swung around to look at where Justin was facing, his heart sinking. Having the presence of mind to erect a privacy bubble, he murmured, "It certainly explains why they weren't answering the phone."

Justin couldn't believe the bad timing. "Why pick today of all days to fly over here?"

"They were obviously planning to surprise you and Hermione," Harry said, before noticing how much luggage was spread out around Justin's family. "Or they were getting concerned and trying to get to safety."

Justin took a step forward. "I don't know the answer but I do know that I'm not going to leave them out there to die."

"Remus will bust our balls for doing this."

"Our balls?"

"Do you really think I'd let you do this alone?" Harry asked, before bringing up a good point. "And you'd never be able to disapparate with four people through the wards."

"I wonder if they tried the portkey."

"I think they'd be closer together if they had," Harry said, checking his wands. "So do we go with Death Eater garb or silencing and invisibility spells?"

From the second floor where they were situated, Justin scanned the area. "Death Eater garb. There are far too many people milling around for spells. We only need a Death Eater to bump into us."

Harry pointed out a small shop across the concourse. "Actually let's use a two-pronged approach: first we'll use the spells to get into that store unseen and then we'll deal with assuming Death Eater gear."

"Agreed," Justin said, checking his wands much as Harry had moments ago. "Let's go."

Once inside of the store, Harry noted several employees cowering in a corner next to several bodies, a Death Eater standing over them.

After erecting a silencing spell to mask the noise inside of the store and dropping the one on him, Harry quietly whispered, "Avada Kedavra", the Death Eater slumping to the ground, making those in the room scream.

Harry dropped the invisibility spell that was on him to address the three employees. "I'm going to get you out of here. I can take you into two groups, so two of you should take my arms."

No-one moved and Harry quickly walked over to them. "I know you're frightened, but if you don't do as I say I can promise you that you're going to end up dead like them."

It was enough to convince a young woman to take Harry's arm, even though she didn't understand how he was going to get her out.

"Take a deep breath," Harry warned, before vanishing a moment later when the young woman did exactly that. On his return, her two colleagues swiftly followed suit when they realized that Harry wasn't going to hurt them.

Justin was already dressed in black and waiting for Harry when he returned, two transfigured masks in his hand. "Transfigure your clothes and let's go."

Sitting on the floor of the concourse, Cordelia Granger clutched her daughter closer to her as two more masked men came closer, paling when the taller of the two made a demand.

"Get up. You're coming with us."

As a frightened Cordelia did as she was told, Lester got to his feet and stepped in front of his wife and daughter. "Leave them alone."

"You're coming too," Harry said, well aware they were being observed by the other Death Eaters guarding the remaining passengers, who were also all seated on the floor. He then pointed to Dudley, who had also stood up in front Cordelia and her daughter. "You too."

"Where do you think you're taking them?"

Justin and Harry both turned to see a silver masked man they were fairly certain wasn't Sirius facing them, six Death Eaters flanking him.

"For a little fun," Harry said, as he edged closer to Dudley and Lester.

"Your orders were to round them up, not play with them," the man snapped.

Spotting that Justin was by now right behind his mother, Harry gave Justin his cue. "It's a pity then I don't follow orders. Bye."

Grabbing Dudley and Lester, Harry disappeared, Justin following suit.

Cordelia was gasping when she reappeared in Potter Place but recognizing it, she held her daughter closer to her. "You obviously know who we are."

Justin immediately dropped his hood. "Mum, it's me. You're safe now."

"How did you know we were there?" a visibly shaken Lester asked as he sank down beside his wife, whose legs had finally given out from under her.

"We didn't," Harry said, not dropping his own hood. "You were lucky, and we have to return."

"But it's too dangerous."

Justin threw up his hood. "We're not engaging them, Mum, but we have to go."

Remus was waiting for them, well aware by now of what had happened, having viewed the scene from the second floor balcony. Throwing up a privacy bubble, he took them to task. "What the hell were you playing at?"

"Rescuing my family..."

Justin got no further as Harry interrupted them both. "Ignotus, you knew we'd never have sat back and done nothing. And I still feel the same about the others stuck down there. We can help some of those people."

"Risus, thanks to your help they've just executed every single one of those Muggles in that group you left behind," Remus told him, causing Harry and Justin to swivel round and spot the large group of bodies littering the floor.

"Fuck!" Harry hit the wall beside him, wincing as pain shot through his fist.

Justin grabbed Harry's hand and ran his wand over it. "Idiot."

"We'll talk about this later," Remus warned, before addressing just Harry. "I know you want to help but as you can see, trying to do that is only going to result in more deaths. At the moment from what I've been able to overhear, the Muggles are simply being rounded up."

Harry quickly told him about what they'd done in the store. "So we can at least help those not in the public view. And if Tom follows his usual MO, he could be simply rounding these people up for sport and playthings for his men. We have to help those we can, even if those left behind pay for it with their lives."

Justin backed up his friend. "I'd rather go out with a simple AK than be raped or tortured. Please don't make them go through what we did, Ignotus."

Recalling his time at the hands of Tom and his men, Remus backed down. Looking over the balcony, he reviewed the stores he could see below. "Very well. Amicus, you'll take the first two stores, Risus, you the next two, and I'll deal with the final three."

After Remus had informed Lighthouse of his plans, the three of them vanished and began to persuade customers to leave with them. However, in the final store, Remus had had to pull out without effecting a rescue after spotting a silver masked wizard coming his way. Although he suspected it was Sirius he was unable to approach him, for just as the man who had confronted Harry had been, this member of the Inner Circle was flanked by six Death

Eaters and, aware he'd be risking his life for nothing, Remus vanished.

As he reappeared upstairs to join Harry and Justin, Remus watched the takeover continue to play out.

Having spotted a Death Eater vanishing, Sirius ordered the guards to take the Muggles out of the store to join the crowd before heading into the next store to find it empty except for the bodies of a Muggle and a Death Eater. It was the same in every store he walked into after that. He quickly worked out that Remus and his team must have had something to do with it. And it certainly explained the Death Eater who'd vanished moments earlier as well as the two rogue Death Eaters who had apparently taken some passengers to safety, although at that time he had no idea that it had been the Grangers whom Harry and Justin had rescued.

Marching out of the final store, Sirius snapped out an order. "I have reason to believe that there are wizards amongst these Muggle passengers who are masquerading as our kind. I want those rogue Death Eaters found. Move."

"We can't do anymore, can we?" Harry asked Remus.

"No, but our friend has thankfully taken himself out of the equation as far as Tom will be concerned," Remus said, Sirius' loud order floating up to those waiting in the stores. "Whereas I think a full scale attack would probably have blown his cover."

Down below, Sirius meanwhile was barking out more orders. "You, you and you: the women are to be taken and held on the departure side together with any children. The men will be caged here."

Remus and those with him then had to stand and watch as the Muggles were herded away from the shops and into pens that had been portkeyed in.

Justin also noticed several Muggles being removed at wandpoint. "I imagine they must be Muggleborns. They're going to get the blame for what we did."

"Collateral damage," Harry muttered, before surveying the caged men below them. "I don't get it. They're just going to lock them up?"

"I think it's temporary," Remus surmised. "Our friend should be able to tell us more later. Risus, I think it's time we left. Tom's obviously not going to destroy the airport and I doubt he's going to drop the wards, so us three are needed to transport everyone out. Tell Bill Weasley he's also needed."

Remus was tired but the other three were exhausted by the time they had finished apparating the teams out. Remus, however, hadn't finished with Justin and Harry and demanded they accompany him to his office.

Justin wanted to groan, thinking longingly of his bed and a hot shower but he did as he was told and followed his superior officer.

Remus sat down once inside of his office and left Harry and Justin standing, well aware of how tired they were but wanting to make a point. "I'm not going to bother asking for an explanation since what you both did is self-explanatory and you both knew how I'd react. Instead I'm simply going to tell you that you're both suspended for a fortnight, fined five hundred Galleons and you'll both be manning the cleaning booths here during the day for a week after you return to work and then the night desk for two weeks after that."

Neither of them bothered to argue with the decision, both answering, "Yes, Sir."

"Dismissed."

Harry yawned as he walked out. "Thank fuck he made that quick instead of droning on like he sometimes does. At least I can get some sleep now."

"Risus, get back in here!"

Justin bit back a laugh. "See you later."

When Harry arrived back at Potter Place, he headed straight for his room and the shower before grabbing a pepper-up and setting out a clean set of clothes.

Justin poked his head around the door as Harry came out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. "How bad did he kick your arse?"

"I'm no longer suspended," Harry grouched. "I'm on night duty for a month, then cleaning duty for two weeks for showing disrespect."

"You forgot he could hear you, didn't you?"

"I'm knackered, Justin," Harry unnecessarily reminded his friend. "So yes, I forgot."

Justin felt guilty and said, "Do you want me to cover for you tonight?"

Harry shook his head. "No, but thanks for offering. I knew what I was doing when I offered to help you rescue our families."

"I almost forgot Dudley was your cousin. Are you going to tell him the truth now?"

"I think so, but we'll see." Yawning, Harry dosed himself with the pepper-up. "See you in the morning."

The Next Day

It was almost two in the afternoon before Harry surfaced and blearily made his way downstairs to join everyone else. After being greeted by Cordelia and Lester, he sat down at the table and ate the breakfast Cordelia had happily made for him, before getting up to rejoin everyone.

"So what made you join us?" Harry asked, sitting down on the sofa next to Cordelia.

"Things were getting pretty bad," Lester said, filling Harry in on what everyone else all knew. "So although I'm none too fond of magic I decided that Cordie and Louise needed a safe haven and so we decided to come here."

"Why didn't you simply portkey?"

"Fortuitously we were burgled two days before my dental surgery was attacked."

"How was that fortuitous?"

"Because it meant that history didn't get a chance to repeat itself. I was sorting out the insurance claim on the house and therefore wasn't in the surgery when it was attacked, although I lost all of my staff and patients again. That's when I knew that avoiding your world wasn't worth risking my family's lives for."

"Yeah," Dudley said, butting in. "I was well surprised when Uncle Lester said we had to leave and I had to go as well."

"Did he tell you why you had to go?" Harry asked, deciding that now was the time to come clean.

"No, just that it wasn't safe for us anymore. I didn't really want to leave but Aunt Cordie said she'd tie me up and drag me if I didn't go." Dudley flashed Cordelia a bright, and what Harry could only call, loving, smile. "So I went."

"Only to run into trouble after we deplaned," Cordelia said, giving a small smile, before it faded. "I thought I was going to die when you picked us out of the crowd."

"I'm sorry but it was our best option."

"Justie told me."

Dudley again interrupted. "So Aunt Cordie said you own this place, Mr. Potter."

"Yes, I do," Harry said, surprised at Dudley's show of respect for him. "It's part of my family's estate and will eventually pass to my son, Will."

"I met him this morning," Cordelia said as Harry mentioned the little boy he'd not only adopted but had now made his heir. "He looks just like you."

"I used the same ritual to adopt him that Sirius used with Justin," Harry told her, having finally told everyone some time ago the truth

about him and Pansy, and that Will hadn't actually been his son. "Lou looks just like you, Cordie."

"Something I'm thankful for," Lester said, grinning briefly at his wife, before returning to their current situation. "Harry, about staying here..."

"I know Justin has the flat where you've stayed before but this is much safer," Harry said immediately.

"I agree," Lester said, surprising Harry who had expected an argument from him. "Or Hermione and Remus have also offered to let us stay at River Dene, but I'm not sure Hermione needs her father under her feet."

"Dad, we wouldn't have offered if it was a problem," Hermione told her father.

"There's more room here," Harry said to Lester. "And the wards here are pretty much impenetrable."

"Then thank you, I'll stay here," Lester said, before glancing at Dudley. "Are you going to do it?"

"Am I going to do what?" Dudley asked.

"I was talking about you, Dudley, not to you," Lester said, before returning his gaze to Harry. "So are you, Harry?"

"After what's happened, I think he has the right to know."

Now Dudley knew they were discussing him but not why. "What are you going on about?"

Harry turned to face his cousin. "Dudley, this is going to come as a shock but you're not really Hermione's cousin, you're mine."

"But..."

"You were put in a sort of witness protection program," Lester said, taking on the onus of explaining to Dudley. "You'd been targeted by Tom because you were related to Harry. In fact you were attacked twice and barely escaped with your life. I offered to take you in."

Dudley brought up a good point. "Hold on. Why not just let me live here if it's so safe?"

Harry had hoped that Dudley wouldn't ask, but he'd obviously become more observant than when Harry had last met him. However, he decided that skating over the truth might be his best option. "We didn't get along."

Dudley, however, persevered. "Why not?"

"Because you were a bully, Dudley," Harry said, being truthful this time. "I actually once lived with you and your family until they died, and the whole time I did, you picked on me."

Dudley, who still had no idea of the real reason behind his parents' deaths, was immediately contrite. "I don't remember but if I did, then I'm sorry, Mr. Potter." He held out his hand.

Harry shook it. "That's okay and you can call me Harry. It's my fault you ended up in this mess in first place."

"So we're good, uh, Harry?" Dudley asked as he shook hands with his cousin.

"We're good, Dudley" Harry agreed, releasing Dudley's hand before letting him on a secret. "By the way, you should know that you're sort of magical."

Dudley's face lit up. "Really?"

"You're what is known as a squib," Harry said, before giving Dudley an example he expected he could relate to. "Like Cordie, if we could get hold of one for you, you could probably use a trainer wand so that you can operate the shower and stuff like that in the house."

"I was well surprised when she showed me her wand," Dudley said, having been a little jealous at the time. "Where can I get a wand like hers?"

"You can't, at least not one tailored to you," Harry said, before getting to his feet. "But I'll look through our store of stolen wands and see if there's anything you can use."

"Cool," Dudley said and he followed his cousin out.

February 28th 2003

Remus beckoned to Harry after he'd knocked on the door and put his around it. "Risus, come in and sit down."

Harry closed the door, dropped his hood and did as he was told. "I thought you were going to be on holiday for another fortnight."

"I was but with Tom's attack on the remaining major seaports here in England, I decided to return sooner."

"How did Hermione take it?"

Remus pulled a face. "Let's just say that I'm glad Cordie's there to run interference."

Harry smiled as he thought about Justin's mother, who had obviously been the one to whip his cousin into shape. "It's hard to remember she was ever gone, although I know Lester still isn't happy."

"Lester's feelings are really the bottom of my list," Remus said, before getting to something that was a little higher up it. "Now down to business. Harry, I know you don't like Commander Jameson..."

It was now Harry's turn to pull a face. "That's an understatement."

"I know, and I'm going to apologize in advance for what I'm about to do."

"You want me to be the liaison, don't you?"

In an effort to try and improve relations between the Unspeakables and BritAD, after their joint efforts at Heathrow and then Manchester and Birmingham, even though all three forays had been failures, Remus had decided to appoint someone to act as a go-between to continue with their efforts.

Remus confirmed Harry's fears. "Yes."

"But..."

"Risus, this isn't a request. It's an order."

Harry scowled but nodded. "Yes, Sir."

"I know you're unhappy with my decision but out of everyone here you two used to be friends," Remus reminded him.

"That was a long time ago."

"Even so, I think you have the most chance of smoothing things over and ensuring that all future joint efforts go as well as our abortive attempts at the airports."

"Yes, Sir."

"You're to report in to Commander Jameson tomorrow. As from then, you'll be working with her while she tries to find somewhere to set up a second base, a base of joint operation."

"So we're giving up Barnstable Towers?"

Remus shook his head. "No, but we want somewhere else where we can have a joint task force, somewhere up North where neither of us currently has a base and where Tom does."

"I understand, Sir."

"Thank you, Risus. I knew I could count on you." Remus then dropped the formality. "And I've also got an invitation to dinner for you in two weeks' time to celebrate the twins' births."

Harry relaxed as they switched back into informality. "Do you want to hold it at Potter Place? I imagine it would get quite crowded at your place."

"I wasn't going to ask but thank you. At least that will make Hermione happy."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "She's not happy?"

"As you probably gathered at the start of this talk, she wasn't happy I came back only three days' after Dru and Delia were born, and things had been a bit strained between us even before that."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Harry said, more than a little astonished. "I thought you two had the perfect marriage."

Remus gave Harry a look of incredulity. "While it might look that way on the outside, it's not always been a bed of roses."

"You never gave any indication that something might be wrong," Harry said, before laughing softly. "Then again I suppose I'm the last person you'd tell."

"Harry, when Hermione and I have our problems, we don't tell anyone, it's not just you," Remus said, before getting up from behind his desk and walking over to the cabinet and pulling out a bottle of scotch. "We try to figure them out on our own."

"Thanks," Harry said as he took the glass of scotch from Remus. "Is it terminal, and I'm not asking because I've got any designs on Hermione."

"I know that," Remus said, well aware that while he suspected Harry did still have feelings for Hermione, he'd never say so or act upon them. "And the answer is no, it's not terminal. We're just going through a bit of a rough patch, something which because of the bond we share I know we'll get through."

Harry took a mouthful of scotch as he read between the lines. "So that means you've marked her."

"I have," Remus admitted, his suspicions about Harry's feelings being confirmed when he spotted an almost imperceptible look of pain cross Harry's face before swiftly vanishing.

"So your marriage can't be that bad."

"It isn't. We might fight like cats and dogs sometimes, a side effect of having two opinionated people in a marriage, but I do love her and I know she loves me. However, as you might appreciate yourself, love isn't always enough."

Harry looked askance at Remus. "You're going to have to explain that one to me."

"Harry, if my marriage can sometimes be a nightmare even with the bond I share with Hermione, can you imagine what a marriage without that sort of connection would be like?"

"You've still lost me."

"What I'm trying to say is that I'm afraid of what it would be like for you if you and Luna ended up dating with marriage in mind. You get along right now because she's your friend and you have a shared interest in Will, particularly as she's become his mother for want of a better description, but I don't think it'll work if you pursue her romantically."

Harry had thought no-one had noticed his growing feelings towards Luna, who had, as Remus had said, taken over Pansy's spot in Will's life. "Was I that obvious?"

"No, but I'm extraordinarily observant," Remus said. "And I know how badly you want a family of your own, just as Luna does, but if you pursue her I think you're going to be doing so for all of the wrong reasons."

Deep down, Harry knew Remus was talking sense. "You're right, I wanted what I thought you had." He smiled ruefully at Remus. "And I'm sorry that your marriage isn't exactly the ideal I thought it was."

"Don't be, Harry," Remus said, before clarifying his feelings about his marriage. "I'm not unhappy in my marriage but it isn't exactly what I thought it would be like." He sighed. "In fact I don't think any of our lives have turned out exactly how we expected them to."

Harry finished off his scotch. "I'll second that."

Remus was hit with a healthy dose of guilt. "Harry, I'd be lying if I said that if I could turn back the clock and undo what I've done to you that I would, because I have to be honest and say that I wouldn't. But if I could've found a way to be with Hermione that didn't end up hurting you, then I'd have done it in a heartbeat."

"As I told you when I encouraged you to go after her, a lot of what happened was my own fault," Harry said, shouldering his part of the blame. "And I made things worse when I didn't come clean about Pansy. Perhaps if I had things would have turned out differently, particularly between us."

"I know we're never going to be able to return to the footing we once had," Remus acknowledged. "But even so, if you ever need to talk to anyone if Sirius isn't around, then I'm here for you."

"I know that and I appreciate it," Harry said, rising to his feet. "And the same goes for you. Despite the water that's gone under the bridge, I'd like to think you could turn to me in the same way."

Remus hugged Harry. "I've missed you."

"Likewise," Harry said, before grinning at Remus. "So do this mean you've changed your mind about the liaison position?"

"Nice try but no." Remus threw up his hood and reverted back to formality. "I'll see you later, Risus."

"Sir," Harry said, as he threw up his own hood and left the office.

Note: I changed Harry sleeping with Pansy after talking to a few reviewers who didn't feel that he'd have done that, even as morose as he was – it would have been too soon after Hermione. It doesn't really have too much bearing on the story but it was something that was bugging me so I went back and made a few changes. However, don't expect Harry's celibacy to last.

Chapter 76: A Heartfelt Revenge

6th June 2003

Harry walked into Tab's lab. "Morning."

Tab glanced down at Harry's shoes and she knew who he was immediately. "Morning, Risus. Ignotus sent you to find out what I'm up to?"

"Yep."

"Does my sister know you're here?"

"Nope." Harry flicked his wand at the door, closing and locking it before dropping his hood to reveal he was wearing a big grin. "I snuck in."

"Aren't you supposed to be working closely with my sister?"

Harry grimaced, Remus having extended his time as a liaison after Harry had successfully proved he could work with Anna, something most other Unspeakables couldn't. "Yep, that's why I snuck in."

"I thought you were researching the new combined camp location."

"We are... we've got one more to look at on Monday."

"So on Monday you go your separate ways."

"I hope so," Harry said, before letting Tab know exactly why he had come to see her. "Because I don't know why but she seems to find any excuse to spend time with me, and it's usually just for silly things, not for stuff that has something to do with the liaison position I hold. And since you're her sister I thought you might know why. I know it isn't because she likes me."

Tab put down what she was working on. "Harry, that's exactly why she's doing it."

"You can't be serious."

"I'm afraid I am," Tab said, amused by the look of concern on Harry's face. "Ever since Azkaban, she's not been able to trust anyone, and although I know you've had issues with her, Anna trusts you."

"But she hates me!"

"Do you remember when little girls used to pick on you at school?"

"Everybody at my school hated me because of Dudley," Harry told Tab, aware she probably didn't know. "So every little girl picked on me, and every little boy for that matter."

"So that analogy's lost on you and I imagine I'll have to spell it out for you." Tab walked away from her work to stand next to Harry. "I think Anna's being so horrid to you to gain your attention."

"She's definitely got that," Harry said, thinking about how often Anna pushed his buttons.

"And that's what she wants. After what happened at Azkaban, she finds it hard to trust any man, and even though she's fighting against how she feels, she definitely likes you, Harry."

"But I've never encouraged her."

"And if you want to stop her, then you're going to have to let her know that," Tab told him, before making a suggestion. "I noticed you'd been spending a lot of time around Luna lately. Why don't you ask her to Julian's party tonight? I know that Anna's attending. It might make it clear to her that you're not interested."

"Luna's going with Julian," Harry said, having spoken to Luna just that morning. "And while I like her, somebody pointed out to me that I would be a bad choice for Luna."

"Then I suggest you find someone else to go with, unless you don't want Anna dogging your every step."

"Are you going with anyone?" Harry casually asked.

Tab could already see where this was going but she responded truthfully nevertheless. "No. I haven't actually been on a date with anyone since Remus and I broke up over Hermione."

"But that was years ago!"

"Thank you for pointing that out."

"Sorry, Tab," Harry said swiftly, before carefully asking, "Do you still like Remus?"

Tab exploded into laughter. "Are you kidding me? Do you really think I'd be pining after him after all this time?"

"Obviously not," Harry said, able to see that Tab was truly astounded by the notion. "So why no boyfriend?"

"Not that it's really any of your business," Tab said in a slightly reproving voice, "but lately I just haven't had the time, and although I've been asked out, there aren't too many men here who aren't in some sort of relationship."

"How about Justin?" Harry suggested.

"I'd have thought you more his type," Tab remarked.

It was now Harry's turn to burst out laughing. "Justin likes women, and even though he rarely dates anyone here, he's been dating a few Muggles from time to time and..."

"He kept that quiet," Tab broke in.

"He's pretty private when it comes to his personal life."

"Okay, so with Justin and everyone else out of the picture, that leaves you, and you're so not my type."

"Then how about doing me a favor and going with me to Julian's birthday party," Harry suggested, "as I'm not interested in you either."

"If I say yes after such an unflattering invitation, what's in it for me?"

"I'll take you to dinner at any restaurant of your choice."

"Don't you think putting up with me for one night will be enough?"
Tab teased.

Harry missed the teasing. "Then what do you want?"

"You were supposed to say no!"

"I don't do the whole female flattery thing well," Harry said apologetically, still not realizing he was being teased. "So are we on?"

"I suppose I must if I don't want my sister running after someone who's totally unsuitable, and we'll decide on what you owe me later."

"Cheers." Feeling much happier, Harry vanished.

Anna was more than a little disappointed to see Sophia Viking laughing with Harry and she told her sister so when she cornered her a few hours into the party. "Tab, do you think Sophia likes Harry?"

Tab had also seen the young woman interacting with Harry. "Yes, I do."

"Oh."

Tab placed a hand on her sister's arm. "You like him, don't you?"

"Of course not, he's as irritating as his boss."

Tab of course knew her sister was lying. "Anna, stop kidding yourself. Of course you like him."

"No, I don't," Anna said forcefully, not wanting to admit it to herself let alone her sister.

"Really?" Tab's tone was disparaging.

"Okay, I find him attractive, yes, but I don't like him and he, like everyone else, doesn't like me."

"Perhaps if you tried softening up a little, people might react differently towards you," Tab said gently.

"I doubt it."

"That's because you won't let anyone in to help you," Tab pointed out, only too cognizant of why her sister was treated so harshly. "And I know it's because of trust issues on your part that you won't let people in, but you have to make the first move if you want that to change."

"But there's no-one I really trust... except for Harry."

Tab knew that Harry wouldn't be too happy with the response she was about to give, but she still gave it. "Then ask Harry for help."

"But he doesn't like me."

"Don't make it an order," Tab suggested. "Ask for his help, don't demand it."

"You really believe he'll accept my offer?"

"You can but ask."

"That means no, doesn't it?"

"No, it means you need to ask."

The sisters were interrupted by a friend of Julian's and Tab excused herself to rejoin Harry, where he was still stuck talking to Sophia.

"So, are you enjoying yourself?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm not a big fan of parties, and most of the people here are Julian's Muggle friends from work, which means no magic, so it seems strange to actually have to refill a glass by hand."

"So translated that means you'd like to leave."

"Yep."

"Don't be so boring, Harry," Sophia complained, batting her eyelashes at Harry.

Harry knew only too well that Sophia had a crush on him but didn't really know how to put her off without hurting her feelings. "Sorry, but it's simply not my scene."

"Nor mine," Tab said, used to peace and quiet. "And I have work I could be doing, but before we leave I'm going to call in the favor you owe me."

"Fire away."

"Anna has something to ask you. Please listen to her before you say no."

"I can do that," Harry said, although he hoped Anna wasn't intending to ask him out. Deciding to make it difficult for her if that was her intention, Harry smiled as he said, "But I think I'd better do it during work time. So, if you two ladies will excuse me."

"I'll come with you," Sophia offered.

Tab hid her smile at Harry's barely concealed look of panic and stepped in to rescue him. "I actually need Harry's help on an experiment. I need a guinea pig and he's it."

As they arrived back at the lab, Harry grinned at Tab. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," Tab said as she picked up her lab coat. "Now shoo. I have work I want to do."

Harry obliged.

Two Days Later

Harry listened to Anna as he had promised Tab he would before shaking his head. "No way. I'm not being tied to a desk."

"Because I'd be your boss?"

"Yes, and because I don't think we can work together."

Anna led the way through the campsite they were reviewing. "But we're working together now."

"Because Ignotus made this an order," Harry said honestly.

"Then let's do what Ignotus wanted and decide if this campsite is suitable for what we need," Anna said brusquely, her voice revealing her disappointment, before she marched off away from Harry.

"Before we shortlist this place we should scout the surrounding area," Harry called out, "which would be this way."

Anna gritted her teeth and turned around heading back towards Harry. "Fine, let's walk up to the top of that bluff in the distance over there."

"No apparition?"

"Lack of exercise makes a person lazy," Anna retorted snottily and set off on foot.

"Enjoy the walk," Harry said in as just as snotty a voice as Anna, and duly disappeared.

Scowling, Anna copied him, landing beside him with a fairly loud crack. "You'll get fat if you don't exercise."

"That's hardly going to bother you, is it?" Harry mocked. "It's not as if you care about my wellbeing."

"Well don't come complaining to me when..." Stepping away from Harry, Anna gave a frightened scream as she missed her footing and somehow managed to fall over the railing that surrounded the bluff that should have prevented something like that from happening.

Not quick enough to prevent her from hitting the ground at the bottom of the bluff, Harry apparated down to the beach below, and he was concerned when he discovered she wasn't moving. After checking her over, he could find nothing wrong and he said her name, "Commander Jameson?"

When she still didn't respond, kneeling down, he touched her cheek and repeated her name. "Commander?"

Anna reached up and tipped Harry on to his back, straddling him before pulling a wand on him. "Surprise."

His scare over, Harry was furious. "That wasn't funny. I thought you'd really injured yourself."

"As I fell I cast a spell to cushion my fall. It's all part of basic training and another reason why I like to keep on my toes. It's something you might want to think about. I should never have been in a position to assault you and then pull my wand on you."

"You're not the enemy."

"But I could have been," Anna pointed out as she looked down into the darkness of Harry's hood. "It's been done to you once before with Greengrass."

"Point taken," Harry gruffly said. "Now that you've shown off, perhaps you'd like to move."

"Don't like being an under a woman, do you, Risus?"

Before Anna could draw breath, Harry had rocked upwards, pushing Anna backwards and reversing their positions, before dropping his hood to look down triumphantly at the woman beneath him. "Not so clever now, are we?"

"Get off me, Risus."

"What's the matter, Commander, don't like being under a man?" Harry taunted, still furious at Anna for frightening him. "Not that that surprises me."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're known as the Ice Queen, Commander," Harry informed her, his anger at Anna being fueled by the fright she'd given him and so he hit back at her, even though it was a little below the belt. "Despite the obvious possibilities, I doubt there's a man out there who'd be interested in being in the same position I'm in now."

"You're saying I'm frigid?"

"If the shoe fits..."

Anna was by now as angry as Harry and wanting to prove him wrong, she closed the gap between them, pulling Harry's head down, her lips pressing against his as she began to kiss him.

Harry grabbed her arms, intending to push her away, but when she tightened her grip on him and made a soft moaning noise, Harry forgot that he didn't like the woman who was kissing him and that he'd just accused her of being an Ice Queen. Instead he sank his fingers into her hair, taking over and deepening the kiss Anna had initiated.

When she began to tug at his cloak, Harry ripped it open before he did the same to hers, his hand slipping inside the blouse beneath so that he could cup Anna's breast. Encountering no bra to impede him, Harry ran his thumb over her nipple, making her gasp into his mouth. Soon his lips left her mouth and travelled to her neck, smothering it with gentle kisses and small nips as he made his way to her collarbone.

Anna grasped tightly to Harry's cloak, her breathing becoming ragged as desire clouded what little judgment she had left and soon tiny little moans started to come from her. It was a particularly loud one that brought Harry to his senses, and he realized what a vulnerable position they were both in out in the open. He therefore disappeared, taking Anna along for the ride.

Anna gave a tiny squeal as they arrived on Harry's bed. "You could have warned me."

"I could say the same about you," Harry said as he lay looking down at Anna.

"You called me frigid and I wanted to prove a point."

"Actually you called yourself frigid," Harry reminded her. "I called you the Ice Queen."

"So why kiss me back?" Anna asked.

"I really have no idea," Harry said truthfully. "It certainly wasn't because I like you."

"You were about to have sex with me!"

"I didn't realize I had to like someone to have sex with them. You certainly don't like me but I didn't see you saying no."

"You caught me unawares."

"True but that didn't prevent you from telling me to stop."

"And would you have stopped if I'd said no?"

Harry immediately rolled off Anna. "Despite our differences, I'm disgusted you even had to ask that."

"Harry, I..."

"Should go, Commander." Harry got up off the bed and walked off.

Seashore

Remus asked Harry to remain behind, taking him into the small meeting room that was situated off the main meeting room. "What gives?"

"Sorry?"

"Risus, don't play games with me," Remus barked, tired after a terrible transformation two nights earlier, to say nothing of his daughters' lousy sleeping habits keeping him awake.

Harry was glad he was wearing his cloak, hiding his face from Remus. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"And you're lying."

"It's personal."

Remus knew in that moment what was at the root of Harry's and Anna's discord, a discord that had been evident to everyone in the

meeting, the pair arguing about the silliest things. "Even though you don't like each other, you slept with her."

Harry scowled but didn't deny Remus' accusation. "Permission to speak freely, Sir."

"Granted."

"You can't tell me that you haven't slept with someone you don't like," Harry said.

"No, I can't," Remus said, casting his mind back to Arabella Zabini. "But I wasn't going to be working with them on a permanent basis."

"Permanent basis?"

"I'm making your assignment permanent," Remus told Harry, although he knew it wouldn't go down well. "Despite your differences, the two of you have made significant progress in uniting our groups and I want things to continue that way."

"This is an order, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

Harry wished he could resign but under the circumstances, he knew with all good conscience that he couldn't. "Yes, Sir."

Remus fished inside of his cloak and withdrew a folded piece of parchment. "I was going to talk to Commander Jameson but I think that given the situation, you should do it instead and when she complains remind her of where she stands."

"Yes, Sir."

"Dismissed."

Harry and Anna were both red faced from shouting at each other, Anna finally losing her temper totally. "Why don't you just fuck off?"

"I believe that's what I said to you the last time before you obliged me on this very desk."

Anna's flush deepened, more this time from anger than anything else. "Something I regret."

"Then why do we keep on doing it?" Harry said, asking her the same question he'd asked himself every time the pair had gotten together over the previous five weeks. "I keep telling myself I don't like you and I don't want you, and yet I keep on having sex with you."

"Perhaps you've got masochistic tendencies."

"Tendencies that you seem to share," Harry noted, well aware of where their argument was going to end up, just as every argument between them ended up. "Or are you going to deny it?"

"No, I'm going to leave my office." Anna went to storm off past Harry, only for him to grab her hand and then climb off the desk and push her up against the wall. "Harry, no."

Harry immediately let go of her. "Then I'll stop."

Anna grabbed Harry's hand. "Don't go."

Harry didn't need telling twice and once again passion exploded between the two of them, Anna responding to Harry's kisses, until she felt his hand sliding up her skirt. "We're in my office, Harry."

"I know," Harry said, and he continued his exploration.

Anna groaned as he found what he was seeking. "Oh Merlin."

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about last time," Harry admitted.

"I have," Anna said, as Harry's fingers continued to work their magic, making her whimper.

"Liar!" Harry whispered, freeing himself from his trousers and lifting Anna up on to him. "You want this as much as I do."

"I don't want you," Anna managed to croak out as Harry maneuvered them so that he could lean against the wall for leverage.

"Then tell me to stop," Harry said as Anna did nothing of the sort and simply wrapped her arms around his neck.

The position they were in made it difficult to kiss, and so Harry used his mouth to suckle at the soft skin of Anna's bare shoulder, with Anna biting her lip to hold back her soft cries.

Nothing more was said as they both strove to find their release, Anna finding it first. When it was over, Anna dropped her head on to Harry's shoulder. "Why is it that the best sex I've ever had is with someone I hate?"

"I don't know," Harry said, his hand still cupping Anna's bottom. "But I do know that if we don't sort something out between us that isn't constant fighting and screwing, then it's going to impact our jobs. I honestly thought about resigning when Ignotus made this assignment permanent."

"I'm not exactly enamored of the idea either," Anna said to Harry as she pushed against him so that he released her. "But you're right that we can't go on like this. What do you suggest?"

"I'm not interested in more than sex with you," Harry said immediately as he cast a spell to clean himself up and tidy his clothes.

"Likewise," Anna countered, although unlike Harry she was lying. "But that still leaves us with a problem."

"One we should overcome by agreeing not let our mutual animosity get in the way of working together," Harry decided. "If we're angry with each other, then we keep it to ourselves."

"Agreed."

"Now that's solved, and I've delivered the message I was ordered to, I'll let you get back to work, Commander." Harry turned to formality to cover his confused feelings.

"I'd appreciate it, Risus," Anna said in a dismissive tone. "Let yourself out."

Needing someone to talk to, Harry went to Tab, who quickly took him to task. "I warned you to end things after the first time. Anna's going to fall for you and get hurt."

"But it's just sex. She even told me she hates me."

"Harry, I think she's protecting herself and that it's more for her," Tab said, disabusing Harry's claim.

"That's not what I wanted to hear," Harry said honestly, running his hand through his hair. "I mean, I'm still lost as to why I ever had sex with her that first time, let alone that I'm continuing to do it."

This didn't exactly come as a surprise to Tab. "It's because you want to be close to someone."

Harry disagreed. "If I wanted to be close to someone I'd have actually gone after someone like you, someone I actually like."

"You like me, Harry, but you don't like me," Tab said, stressing the word. "And I'd have blown you off."

"It still not answering my question," Harry reminded her, smarting a little at Tab's blunt and truthful comment.

"You knew she'd never be able to hurt you as Hermione did," Tab said, continuing to be honest. "You might think you've gotten over her but I doubt you have."

"Tab, as you so rightly pointed out not that long ago, it's been years since Remus got together with Hermione."

"But unlike me and my feelings for Remus, I don't think you ever truly got over your feelings for Hermione."

Harry slumped down into a chair as he thought about what Tab was saying. "I can't let myself think that, Tab, because if I did then it'd mean that I'll never be happy with anyone but her."

Tab knelt down and took his hands. "I think you can be but not with Anna."

"Why couldn't I have fallen for you?" Harry asked, honestly liking the woman holding his hands.

"I don't know, Harry," Tab said, tugging him easily to his feet as she rose up. "But what I do know is that my sister is as wrong for you as I am."

Harry kissed Tab's nose. "Then I'd better continue my search. Thanks for listening to me. I didn't think it right to go to Justin to talk this one over."

"I'm glad you trust me enough to confide in me," Tab said, kissing Harry on cheek. "And I'll always be free to talk to you if you can't talk to Justin."

"Speaking of whom, I'm late for a meeting with him and Remus." Harry let go of Tab's hands.

"Then off you go," Tab said, but added a warning. "But promise me you'll break things off with Anna."

"I promise," Harry said, before vanishing.

Harry's concerns over his current situation with Anna were to be put aside, however, with Sirius' news. "Tom's sending you to China?"

"It's one of the few places he hasn't gotten a foothold in yet."

"But why you?"

"Because I literally wiped the floor with him in a dueling competition," Sirius revealed, in a somewhat grumpy voice.

"You should have just lost to him," Harry said, remembering the few duels where he'd gone up against Tom.

"I was acting in the heat of the moment."

"And now you're paying the price for showing off," Remus said, before making an offer to Sirius. "Do you want us to warn Magical Premier Yang?"

"Do you think he'll listen?"

"Absolutely," Remus said without hesitation. "Unspeakable Silk has already brokered a deal with Jameson's counterpart, General Shao,

to supply additional weapons and medicine for us. I'm sure he can speak to Shao who in turn can speak to Yang."

"You never mentioned it," Sirius complained.

"You're never here to tell," Remus responded before asking, "When do you go?"

"In two days."

"That doesn't leave us much time."

"Just do what you can; I don't fancy being slaughtered out there."

"Leave it with me."

March 11th 2005

Sirius arrived back in England, exhausted from the portkey travel. After spending the last sixteen months setting up and entrenching the small foothold Tom believed he had managed to make in China, Sirius had finally been ordered to return home to England.

Tom dismissed Sirius fairly quickly telling him to report in two days later, pleased with what Sirius had achieved. He had no idea that it had been achieved with help from Remus, who, together with Unspeakable Silk, had brokered a deal of sorts with the Chinese magical government.

Not wishing to lose innocent soldiers to a battle they had no need to truly fight, the magical government had called upon every prisoner in the local regions, both magical and Muggle, who had committed murder or a similarly heinous offense, to fight against Sirius' troops. To ensure they did as they were told, they were obliviated and told they were in the army and that they had to fight.

Needless to say, the majority of the prisoners, Muggles, had been the first to die despite putting up a valiant effort, their 'wands' doing nothing to protect them. The magical prisoners had, however, put up a fight as they'd been instructed, but eventually they too had met the same fate. A few, of course, escaped by deserting but all in all, it had been more drawn out affair than anyone had desired, the magical prisoners holding out far long than anyone would have

given them credit for. And Sirius had therefore remained in China for a lot longer than any of them had expected, Tom wanting to make sure that this incursion would be permanent.

Dae, however, was rather rude about Sirius' accomplishment. "He had it easy."

"I'd like to see you take on almost three thousand men with just four hundred and triumph," Tom said, his voice silky soft.

"He lost over three hundred of your men."

"But he still achieved my goal," Tom reminded him, before issuing a warning of sorts. "You're welcome to try to match his performance when you've finished your current mission on Friday and Moscow comes up for attack."

Dae knew when to back down and he did so now. "I'd rather not."

"Then be quiet and show some respect where it's deserved."

Having no idea that Tom had actually defended him, Sirius headed home to the flat he kept in London. Arriving in his closet so that he could drop off his clothes, he could hear the shower running in the bathroom next door. Tapping on the door, he got no reply and so he opened the door up, his wand withdrawn as he stepped into the steamy room that shouldn't have been occupied. "Hello?"

Luna poked her head and upper body out of the shower, not bothered that she was completely nude. "Sirius, you're back!"

Sirius swiftly backed up at the sight of Luna's bare breasts, trying to look anywhere but at them. "Luna, I didn't expect to see you here."

"I know," Luna said, unabashedly grabbing a towel and wrapping it around her body. "Did you see any interesting animals in China?"

"Um, no," Sirius said, thinking the question strange given the current circumstances. "What are you doing in here?"

"Showering," Luna said, stating the obvious before explaining in more detail. "I was waiting for Julian to come in and have wild

monkey sex with me but I don't think it's going to happen now that you're back."

"Wild monkey sex?" Sirius couldn't help but echo.

"Oh yes," Luna said without any sign of shame at all. "Julian likes me to get up..."

Sirius hurriedly interrupted the blonde girl. "I don't think I need to know what Julian likes." He turned around as the door from the bedroom opened and a very naked Julian walked into the corridor that linked the bathroom and bedroom and which served as a closet.

"Shit!"

As Sirius flicked his wand and a robe flew off a hanger and around his nephew, Julian asked, "Uncle Sirius, what are you doing in here?"

"I was under the impression that this was my closet in my home."

"Sorry," Julian said apologetically. "But it's the only place I can get some time alone with Luna; Justin's flat is a madhouse."

"So you're dating?"

"Actually she's my wife," Julian said, walking over to Luna and putting his arm around her. "If you remember, we hooked up at my birthday party last year and I asked her to marry me four months ago."

"Wasn't that a bit quick?"

Julian disagreed. "It's not much different than what Justin did with Bethany, and with the way things are going in our world, we decided that we didn't want to wait."

Sirius understood this and so he brought up the unfamiliar name Julian had mentioned. "Bethany?"

"She was Justin's girlfriend when they were at Hogwarts before he went out with Padma."

Sirius now vaguely remembered Justin having mentioned her once but could recall little else about her. "And how did he meet her again?"

"In one of our rescues of Muggleborns from a work camp, well, a rescue before the prisoners were transferred. She's staying in one of the two new camps that Harry helped Anna set up."

"Is Harry still working with Anna?" Sirius knew that Harry had been having sex with Anna before he'd left but he had no idea as to the current situation.

Julian burst out laughing. "Not a chance – they argued like cat and dog. Tab talked Remus into letting Harry give up the liaison position. Bethany took over the position until she fell pregnant and Harry now occasionally does liaison work when the Unspeakables and Aurors need to work together."

"So Justin is married to Bethany?"

This time Luna answered. "No, they moved in together about nine months ago because Justin got her pregnant."

This brought Sirius back to Julian's comment about being in a similar position. "So are you pregnant as well?"

"I don't mean to be rude, Uncle Sirius, but that's none of your business," Julian said somewhat indignantly.

"But you're okay with your wife telling me she's about to have wild monkey sex?"

"Luna!" Julian exclaimed. "You can't say that."

Luna shrugged. "Why not? It's true. We were going to have wild monkey sex. In fact I'd still like to."

"Then I think I should go next door and use the spare room," Sirius said swiftly, half afraid that Luna would drop her towel and begin there and then. "Julian, I need to talk to you when you're free."

"Um, Uncle Sirius," Julian said hesitantly. "Cammie Mortimer is using the spare room."

"I beg your pardon?"

"A lot's gone on since you went out to China and, when all communications were cut off, we had no way of contacting you. We only knew you were still okay because of the tapestry."

"That still doesn't explain what that woman is doing in my spare room."

"She's pregnant."

Sirius let out his breath in amazement. "Is there some sort of baby epidemic or something?"

"It's just Mortimer who's pregnant right now," Julian clarified for his uncle. "Bethany had her baby son three months ago, Hermione had her fourth and, she swears final baby, Mimi, about nine weeks ago and Lucy's daughter, Billie, was born just after that."

Sirius, however, was the most interested in his son. "And why isn't Justin married to this Bethany?"

"He was waiting for you to come back," Julian said, realizing that this was a massive shock to Sirius. "He said only then would he get married, although Bethany isn't too keen on the idea in spite of the fact they've got Orion now."

"We'll talk about this later." Sirius said, suddenly feeling more tired than he had in months. "But first I need a shower, so if you two would kindly find somewhere else to do your monkey business, I'd like my room back."

With Luna and Julian having already told Justin they were going to head back to Justin's place, it was left to Justin to greet Sirius. As his father walked in, Justin ran across the room and hugged him.

"It's good to see you. It seems like forever."

Sirius glanced at the woman who was sitting on his sofa. "Yes, it does. Are you okay?"

"Fine."

Cammie stared back at Sirius. "Well, well, the infamous Sirius Black finally makes an appearance. I was beginning to think that Tom had disposed of you despite what Justin told me."

"You're on first name terms with him?"

"He's one of my personal jailers, so yes I am, although he's yet to return the courtesy."

"I'm acting as one of Mortimer's guard until she gives birth," Justin explained. "After that she'll be temporarily removed to the prison that Commander Jameson has had erected in Tabernacle Bay."

"Where?"

"Even I know it's the rebels' Northern base; strange how you don't," Cammie interjected, her sharp mind ticking over. "So where have you been, Sirius Black?"

"That really is none of your business, Mortimer," Sirius snapped, before shaking himself, still not quite able to believe his ex-lover, now Tom's wife, was sitting in his flat. "But I do know you can't stay here now that T..."

Tired and not thinking straight, Sirius still managed to catch himself just as he was mentioning Tom. It was enough of a slip, however, to give himself away, and Cammie stood up, stretching and rubbing her large stomach.

"Now that what, Sirius Black? Why would my taking up residence in your home be such a problem all at once? It can't be because you're afraid of your significant other finding me here, not given that I'm a prisoner and I've already been here for months."

"It hardly matters."

"But I think it does," Cammie said, able to see that she was irritating Sirius no end, as she ran over the various possibilities for Sirius' reticence in her mind.

"And I'd disagree."

Ignoring Sirius, Cammie continued on regardless. "It might be that you find it a nuisance to have me here now that you're home, but you'd have simply said that instead of cutting yourself off mid-sentence. The others certainly had no problem in expressing their refusal to house me: Jameson doesn't want me on her base in case Tom somehow finds me there and exacts retribution; Potter is refusing to allow me to stay at his home with children there; and Ignotus has expressed a similar concern to Jameson. Considering you cut yourself off when I believe you were just about to mention a name, I can only come to one conclusion: You're afraid Tom is going to find me here now that you're back, aren't you?"

"I've no idea what you're talking about," Sirius said in a casual voice as he began to help himself to a scotch.

"Spare me the lies, Black. You had no idea of the location of your own base, which means you were somewhere that has no way of contacting the outside world. Right now Tom has only one such place, or did: China. So which one of his men are you?" Cammie asked, having successfully put two and two together and come up with four. "Now I can't imagine you're an underling as Tom has no interest in paying home visits to them, so it leaves with me a narrow choice of subjects."

"I'm friends with one of Tom's men that just returned from China," Sirius said, giving up on his denials.

Cammie pointed out a loophole in Sirius' lie. "But there aren't that many people who know who I am. Tom decided not to take any chances after Cho's death that someone might get to me. So you must be someone close to him: Altus, Renovo or Magenta. Now I know you can't be Altus, which just leaves Renovo or Magenta. I'm willing to say Magenta."

"I think you missed Argentus."

"He's dead," Justin informed his dad. "Harry killed him after draining him magically dry when we captured Mortimer three months ago."

"But you've obviously been temporarily reprieved because of the baby," Sirius said, after waving his wand over her stomach, a sizeable pink cloud appearing above it, indicating Cammie was

carrying a daughter. "Eight months along; that doesn't give you very long to live."

"Commander Jameson said it would be inhumane to kill her after keeping her prisoner for so long, so after giving birth, Mortimer is going to be removed to Tabernacle where she'll be stripped of her magic and obliviated before being shuffled into the Muggle prison system," Justin said.

"The Muggle prison system?"

"We don't have the room to house everyone we capture, and Mum came up with the idea that we could integrate them into the Muggle prison system. Thankfully she knows how to use a computer, and the Muggle security was easy to deal with, especially with everything in uproar at the moment in the Muggle world. We'd have integrated them into Tom's work camps but without you that would prove far too difficult."

Sirius ran his wand over Cammie's stomach again, determining the baby was currently healthy. "I don't foresee any complications with the birth. Everything looks good, so I'd be happy to ship her off to a Muggle work camp once this is over."

Sirius' deft handling of the scan of Cammie's stomach, however, had finally given him away. "Renovo!"

Sirius gave up the pretence as he tapped his ring. "I think you can call me Simon, don't you? It's not as if Justin doesn't know about my alter ego."

"She can't talk about you, anyway," Justin said, filling in Sirius in on what Anna had demanded in exchange for sparing Cammie's life and that of her unborn child. "She swore an oath not to reveal anything she might learn if she's ever rescued; if she does, she'll die."

"Either way, she can't stay here," Sirius said, well aware that Tom knew where his flat was. "I think Jameson can put up with her for a few nights, at least until we find somewhere else to lock her up until after she's had the baby. Then she gets transferred out."

"She could use Remus' transformation cell until we get somewhere sorted."

"Before she goes, I want a further oath from her. We can't take the chance that if she is somehow rescued she'll blow my cover," Sirius said, not willing to take any chances whatsoever. "She's going to swear that she'll never hint that she knows that I'm Sirius Black, she'll never show any reluctance to be alone with me, which, given our past history, would give Tom cause to suspect something is very wrong. She'll also need to swear that she'll never bear arms against me or attempt to kill me or attempt to manipulate me in any way, shape or form."

Cammie interrupted while Sirius was thinking to see if he'd missed anything else he needed swearing. "Don't you think that's a bit of overkill?"

"I'm well aware of what a clever, manipulative bitch you are," Sirius said brusquely, before turning to Justin. "On second thoughts, I'll take her to Jameson myself, Justin. I just want a word in private first. However, warn Jameson to expect us, and if she gripes, inform Ignotus of the situation and get him to override her."

"Okay, Dad," Justin said and vanished.

"Dad?"

"I see Justin didn't share that much with you. He's my son," Sirius said, before sitting on a bar stool opposite Cammie. "Now I'm going to let you have a wand to swear the oath I've outlined. But you know what I'll do to you if you try to attack me."

"I'm not swearing anything to you, you turncoat bastard!" Cammie hissed.

"And yet you gave Jameson an oath."

"That was before I had her measure," Cammie said, before pointing out the obvious, an amused and triumphant smile on her face. "Whereas I have yours, and I know you'll never hurt the woman you once wanted to marry."

Sirius drew in his breath as he recalled asking Cammie to marry him, something he'd told no-one else about, not even Harry. Three days after she'd said yes, she had ditched him for Tom. "If I still loved you, maybe not, but given that you deliberately ripped my heart out and trampled on it, I wouldn't count on my acting too kindly towards you."

"You'd still never kill me."

"Willing to take the chance, are you?"

"You're as lily-livered as the rest of them here," Cammie sneered. "They couldn't even bring themselves to lock me up in a cell because I was carrying a baby."

"That was probably for the baby's sake, not yours," Sirius guessed, quite correctly.

"You'd still never do it," Cammie challenged.

"I tortured my son and my best friend to maintain my cover," Sirius said, wanting Cammie to be reminded as to exactly how far he would go.

Cammie knew he was telling the truth about Remus but not Justin. "You're lying about your son."

Sirius placed his wand against his chest. "I, Sirius Black, swear on my life and my magic that I tortured Justin, who was masquerading as Ignotus, until he begged me to let him die." Sirius then lowered his wand, before making his feelings very clear. "And I love him and Remus, whereas I can genuinely say I now fucking loathe you. Now tell me I wouldn't hurt you."

"What you do at Tom's decree to maintain your cover and what you do here are two different things," Cammie declared, having witnessed firsthand how unlikely it was that anyone would ever hurt her.

Sirius gave his final warning. "I'll give you one last chance."

"I'm not swearing to anything that would stop Tom from finding out about your deceit," said a very calm Cammie, turning her back on Sirius.

"Then you leave me little choice," Sirius said, aiming the proffered wand at her. "Incarcerous."

Cammie still refused to give Sirius any quarter, even as she felt her lower body go numb with the next spell Sirius cast. "Your threats won't work. I'm going to make sure Tom takes you down."

"In that case, I do believe it's time to deliver your baby."

Moments after his warning and without giving Cammie another chance to protest, Sirius did exactly as he had promised he would, using a spell to tear open Cammie's abdomen and release the baby.

An extremely shocked Cammie began to weep, although not with pain as the spell Sirius had cast saved her from feeling the extraction he'd just performed.

Checking over the bloody baby, Sirius cleared its airways, before turning to face Cammie and removing the numbing spell. "I suggest you think over your decision while I deal with your daughter."

He then vanished and reappeared at the surgery in Seashore, where he was glad to see that Lucy was on duty. "This baby needs attention, Lucy."

Lucy immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion and, foregoing stating the obvious about Sirius being back, said, "I presume Mortimer went into labor early."

"You could say that," Sirius responded, before returning to his home, wincing at the volume of the screams of pain before casting a second numbing spell on Cammie as well as a blood stopping spell.

Panting from the aftermath of the pain, Cammie spat out, "Bastard!"

"Yes, I am," Sirius acknowledged as he stood over her. "But unlike the one you're married to, I'm giving you one last chance. However, if you don't take it, I'm going to take a leaf out of his book and remove both spells and let you bleed to death in agony while I watch."

Not wishing to die and no longer trusting him not to hurt her, Cammie did as Sirius asked before stating in a calm but deadly voice, "I swear I'll make you pay for this."

"Of course you will, Mortimer," Sirius said, tending to Cammie's injuries he'd inflicted before offering her a painkilling potion. "I suggest you take this if you don't want to be in pain when the spell wears off."

Not wishing to undergo such agony again, Cammie opened her mouth and let Sirius feed her the potion. Sirius then told her what was going to happen.

"I'm going to transfer you to the medical wing where you'll believe you went into labor early and your baby died. I've no doubt that being the bleeding heart she is, Jameson will allow you to recover from the emergency surgery I just performed before she strips you of your magic. Stupefy."

Before she could protest, Cammie's world went black.

Chapter 77: Trojan Horse

Two Days Later

Sirius sat down with Harry. "Merlin, I'm tired."

"Did Tom go easy on you?"

Sirius nodded. "I'm his golden boy right now thanks to my efforts in China. He's tasked me with finding his wife, who he knows isn't dead thanks to the familial spell."

"You can pretend to track her down once we've stripped her of her magic later today," Harry suggested. "He won't be happy to find her like that, I imagine, but at least you'll have done your job."

"I think I'll give it a week before I 'find' her," Sirius said, waggling his fingers in the air as he spoke. He then changed the subject. "Enough about Mortimer. How are things with you?"

"No current girlfriend, but I'm good," Harry said honestly, before grinning at Sirius' raised eyebrow. "And no, I've definitely ended things with Anna; actually I ended it the day after you left for China. After that things got worse between us until Bethany stepped in and offered to act as an impartial liaison."

"Ah, yes, Justin's girlfriend."

"Have you met her yet?"

Sirius had and had been surprised. "Yes, and, I have to be honest, if I was looking for someone for Justin, she's exactly the sort of girl I'd have chosen for him: clever, attractive, personable, to say nothing of the fact that she's given me a grandson."

Harry watched Sirius' face darken as he mentioned Orion. "I can see that Justin's told you that Orion has the same gene defect you do."

"I'm half afraid that I passed something on during the Abrogo ritual."

"Justin still tested clean for the defect after Orion's birth, so he and Bethany are hopeful that their next son will be free of the gene."

"I know, they said so, but I imagine it's still going to be hard for Orion to have to deal with the fact that even though he'll inherit the Black estate, he'll never be able to have a son to carry on the family name."

"Sirius, he's only a few months old," Harry reminded him. "I think it's something to worry about at a later stage, unlike Tom's daughter."

"I take it that Lucy told you what I intend to do."

"She has and I'm guessing that's why you asked to speak to me alone."

"It is."

Sirius then confessed about what he'd done to Cammie, aware that Harry of all people wouldn't simply condemn him.

Harry didn't. "You must have really loved her."

"I did," Sirius said, remembering exactly how much. "I asked her to marry me."

"My God, Sirius!"

"I was ready to give up everything for her, probably even my soul, and she trampled on my heart as if it meant nothing." Sirius gave Harry a small, tight smile. "It hurt, Harry, more than I could have ever imagined anything hurting."

"You should have said something."

Sirius shook his head. "I couldn't. My grief was too raw, so I hid my feelings behind calming potion and emotional suppressant. I knew if I hadn't, Remus would've found out, and I wasn't ready to talk to anyone about it. It certainly gave me some perspective into what you went through with Hermione."

"At least she didn't do it deliberately," Harry said, defending his former girlfriend. "I treated her terribly and was partially to blame for what she did. To be honest, though, I had more issues with Remus than with her."

"I don't blame Tom," Sirius said, surprising Harry. "He actually told me that Cammie had made him a sexual offer but he'd refused her. After I told him I didn't care what she did, that we were nothing anymore, only then did he accept her offer, and of course she went on to get pregnant with Merry and so Tom married her."

"Still, it couldn't have been easy."

"It wasn't, and I don't think it was for him either," Sirius said, again defending Tom. "In some respects I wonder if that's one of the reasons he sent me away."

"Apart from the fact that you kicked his arse, you mean," Harry said with a satisfied grin.

"I have to be honest," Sirius said, his grin matching Harry's. "It felt awfully good to beat him like that."

"Revenge always feels good," Harry said truthfully. "When I saw how hurt Hermione was when she believed I'd gotten Pansy pregnant, it felt good. Well, it did for a while... until I was hit with a healthy and rather terrible dose of guilt, just as you're being right now."

"You think I'm making a mistake, don't you?"

"You can't take his baby on, Sirius."

"You took Will on."

"That was very different, and don't think I don't understand that you want to do the right thing, because I do," Harry said, before trying to make Sirius see reason. "But how the heck would you explain a baby if Tom dropped by, to say nothing of the fact that you're planning to bring up a child who, every day, will remind you of the woman you loved and lost."

As Harry mentioned Tom, Sirius realized he hadn't been thinking straight because of his guilt at what he'd done to punish Cammie. "So what do we do with her if I don't take her?"

"She can live with me for the time being," Harry offered. "If you still feel the same way when this is over, then take her on."

Although Sirius had wanted to do it immediately, he agreed. "Perhaps you're right." He checked his watch. "I have to go. Tom's organizing something big but since I've been out of the loop, I've no idea what it is."

"Just be careful," Harry warned. "I don't want our best and newly returned healer getting hurt."

"Neither do I," Sirius said before vanishing.

As Sirius was leaving Potter Place, Justin was flying in through the window of Remus' office in their base in the North, ducking to miss a light fixture as he dropped the hood on his cloak. "Ignotus, I came across Hagrid in the woods outside of Hogwarts during one of our patrols – he's cut up pretty badly. We've had him swear an oath that he's not a spy and, once Jameson has passed him, he's going to be moved into the medical bay at Seashore."

Lowering his wand now that Justin had identified himself, Remus, who was just about to leave to deal with Cammie, decided that the Hagrid situation had to take precedence. "I'll meet you there. Let Unspeakable White know the situation and tell her she's to take over your shift. Harry can then take over from her."

"I'll need to get this broomstick back to him."

"Inform White and bring your broomstick with you. You can meet up with Harry and fill him in on the situation after you've accompanied me to interview Hagrid."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," Justin promised, disappearing to track down Unspeakable White.

Seashore

In the medical bay, Lucy was doing a double-take at the size of the massive man who was being led in and she enlarged the treatment bed. "Hello, I understand you must be Rubeus Hagrid."

Hagrid nodded. "I am, Ma'am." He glanced to his right as he heard someone come in.

It was Remus, who entered the examination room through the still open door, his hood hiding his face. "Can I intrude?"

Lucy nodded. "Of course."

Remus directed his next comment to Hagrid. "I'm Ignotus, head of the Unspeakables."

"Rubeus Hagrid," Hagrid said, holding out his hand.

Remus shook the proffered hand before beginning his questioning. "You've been a captive for a long time, Hagrid. I'd like to know how you escaped."

"I'd been workin' at some of meh bars on the cage for a long time," Hagrid said, wincing as Lucy wiped clean a cut over his eye. "They finally gave this morning an' I thought I was free an' clear but Death Eaters spotted me an' gave chase."

"How did you get through the wards?"

"I just ran at top speed," Hagrid said, not really knowing how he had bypassed the wards. "Then there were a feeling like a massive bolt of lightning an' I was in the woods."

Both Remus and Hagrid turned to look at the entry door to the medical facility as it opened. It was a cloaked Justin, who joined them in the examination room after Remus beckoned to him and asked exactly what had happened that morning.

"I spotted a flash in the wards and when I flew lower to investigate, I spotted Hagrid being chased down, Sir. I therefore decided to attempt a rescue before his pursuers caught up with him, and so, while the others provided air cover, I managed to get down to him and emergency portkey us out of the area."

"I thought I was a goner until this gentleman grabbed me," Hagrid said, completely unaware of who was under the cloak. "Thank you."

The medical bay was proving to be a popular destination and the next person to walk in was Hermione, bearing her eldest daughter, Kara, who was playing with her hair. Kara, of course, took one look at Hagrid, who she could see through the open door, and screamed.

Scrambling down from her mother's hold, she gave the game away as she ran to her father, who had stepped into the doorway to see why his daughter had screamed.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

Although Remus had no idea how his daughter had identified him in his cloaked state, feeling her fear of Hagrid hitting him like a tidal wave, he didn't deny who he was. Dropping his hood, he picked up his daughter to comfort her. "It's okay, Kara. Hagrid is a friend of Daddy's. He won't hurt you."

Kara simply buried her face in Remus' neck as Remus carried her into the room with him.

"Sorry about that," Remus said to Hagrid.

"That's quite all right, Professor Lupin. Perfectly understandable that she'd be afraid."

Remus smiled at the appellation. "I haven't been called Professor in a very long time."

"I 'spect you're used to Ignotus now."

"I hope you understand why I didn't reveal myself," Remus said in an apologetic voice.

"Course I do," Hagrid said before he noticed the green-eyed boy with black hair staring back at him from the doorway, Luna holding his hand. "With eyes that color you have to be Harry's boy."

After the Abrogo ritual Will had begun to look more and more like Harry every day and was now unmistakably his. "I'm Will."

"I'm Hagrid, Will, pleased to meet yeh. Is this your mummy?"

"No, I'm not. I'm taking care of him. I'm Luna Lovegood Viking," Luna announced. "Just in case you don't remember me."

"I remember you," Hagrid said with a smile. "So yeh married now..."

While Luna and Hagrid were talking, Remus turned to Hermione and asked about their missing children. "Where are the twins and Mimi?"

"Kara was complaining of an earache so Luna suggested to me that we leave the younger ones with Tonks and we bring Kara here."

Immediately guessing what might be wrong, Remus stroked his daughter's soft black hair. "Kara, sweetie, do you want to play a game?"

Kara brightened considerably at the thought of playing a game. "Yes, Daddy."

Remus turned back to Hermione. "Let me take her outside and in a moment whisper her name."

Suddenly Hermione knew why Kara might have earache and could have kicked herself for not thinking of it immediately as Remus had done. "Okay."

A few moments later, Remus returned. "She could hear you as well as I could – I think her ears are hurting because her enhanced auditory ability has just kicked in. I'm afraid that her eyesight could also become an issue at some point in the future."

Kara loved the small rounded glasses that she had to wear because her eyesight was currently so poor, and Hermione could only imagine the fuss her daughter was going to make if she was ever told she would have to be parted from them. "I love you dearly but sometimes I wish you weren't a werewolf."

"Likewise," Remus said, before speaking to Lucy. "Although we think we know what the problem is, can you still take a look at her, just to make sure?"

"In a moment," Lucy said as she threw away yet another piece of cotton wool soaked in blood, before she aimed her wand at Hagrid's head and healed the last of his cuts. "You should heal up quickly if you're anything like Remus."

"I do," Hagrid confirmed.

Remus interrupted. "Now that you're cleaned up, I have a few more..."

Remus halted in mid-sentence, stiffening as did Hagrid and Kara, and Hermione knew something had to be wrong for all three to react in such a similar fashion. "Remus, what's wrong?"

"Somebody's just erected wards," Remus said in a worried voice.

Then everybody else in the room also stiffened as the medical bay suddenly began to darken and, as if it was rising up from the floor, a full moon began to appear at the base of the wall.

"Daddy, you hurting me!"

Hermione gasped as she turned to look at her husband and daughter, her blood running cold at the sight of Remus' closed eyes and pain etched into his features. Her tone authoritative, she snapped, "Remus, give me Kara now!"

Remus thrust the girl away from him and collapsed on to the floor, gasping, "This can't be happening."

Luna, who was standing next to Hagrid, noticed his eyes changing. "Hagrid?"

"Run!" Hagrid bellowed, also experiencing the same change as Remus.

Alarmed, Hermione rushed to open the external door, to see to her horror a group of Death Eaters and Tom heading their way. "Oh God!" She slammed to the door. "We can't stay in here and we can't go out there."

Remus growled in his throat, trying to hold at bay a change that shouldn't be happening, but he knew he was fighting a losing battle and just before he began his final change, he screamed out, "Then hide."

Justin took charge. "Into Lucy's office. I'll barricade the door."

"You can't stay out here, they'll tear you apart," Luna said hurriedly.

"I wasn't going to," Justin said, closing the door and casting spell after spell upon it. "That will hold against them, at least I think it will, but I can't make any promises about those Death Eaters outside. There are too many of them."

"Mama!" Kara wailed as she began to cry with fright.

Hermione immediately pointed towards their only other exit. "Check that window, Justin."

Justin looked out. "Shit! We're surrounded."

"I have an idea," Luna said, pointing at Justin's broomstick, which Justin had brought with him so that he could pass it to Harry. "Hermione, take Kara and Will and get on this. I'll cast invisibility spells on you and then blast a hole in the roof."

"I can't leave you here and I'm not that good a flier."

They all knew how true this was. Hermione therefore tried to thrust her daughter at Justin. "You take her and Will and go."

Afraid, Kara clung more tightly to her mother, her lupine strength that she had also acquired from her father making it impossible for them to pry her free. Will, however, didn't have the same luxury and Luna had no problem in making her charge mount the broomstick. "I'm not a good flier either, so you have to take them, Justin."

"I'm a better dueler than any of you," Justin pointed out. "I have to stay here to try and defend you. And besides, Dad and Harry would never forgive me if I left any of you alone to face what's out there."

"And what about Bethany and Orion?"

Justin fully expected to die that day and he had to fight against his tears as he thought about his girlfriend and son. "Tell them I love them, of course, and that I tried to do the right thing."

Luna swung around as a massive roar came from the room next door and then the sound of shattering glass. "I think Remus or Hagrid or both just got out."

"Then that's the diversion we need," Lucy decided. "Hermione, whether you think you're a good flier or not, you have to put the children first, just as I need to put this facility first."

Suddenly there came the sound of something trying to get into the room and a howl. Hermione knew without question it was Remus, having heard his cry on more than one occasion. "He knows Kara and I are in here. I don't think he'll harm us but he'll kill the rest of you if he gets in."

"Hermione, you can't take the chance you're right. You have to go."

"I disagree. I stand more chance of surviving here," Hermione said to Luna, wincing as the sounds of Remus trying to get in made Kara cry harder and cling even more tightly to her. "Lucy, you're the best flier here, so take Will and Luna and go."

"Like hell am I going!" Lucy barked out.

Justin, however, agreed with Hermione and, well aware that they were running out of time, turned his wand on Lucy. "Imperio."

Luna gasped out, "What are you doing?"

"Saving your lives," Justin said, grabbing her by the waist and swinging her on to the broomstick behind Will. He then gave instructions to Lucy. "Get on the broomstick and take them to safety if you can."

Lucy mounted the broomstick before shaking her head and the spell off her. "How dare...!"

Justin stepped away. "No arguing, you need to go." He tapped the broomstick handle. "Mutatis Vengeance."

"I can't handle that!"

"It still handles like a normal broomstick but you've now the capability to go faster if you need it."

As a spell came whistling in through the window, shattering the glass and impacting the wall behind Lucy, the door shuddered and wood began to splinter.

Justin aimed his wand at the trio, casting sticking, invisibility and silencing spells. "Go!"

As the door imploded, now having no choice, Lucy aimed her wand at the ceiling, blasting a huge hole through it before she shot up into the air.

As Lucy took to the skies, Justin turned both of his wands on the angry werewolf that had burst through the door. "Stupefy."

It didn't work and Remus sent both Justin and his wands flying through the air with a flick of his paw. Terrified for him, Hermione screamed at Justin, "Transform now or he'll kill you."

With a raging werewolf advancing on him again and aware he'd never be able to grab his wands in time, Justin did as Hermione ordered and changed, scuttling off and out of reach of Remus, who began to scrabble angrily at the cupboard that Justin had disappeared under.

As Justin vanished, Remus turned his attention back to his wife and daughter, growling loudly. Hermione dropped to the ground, using her body to protect her daughter. Shaking and curled up, she stiffened as she felt a wet nose touch her neck, before a tongue swiped across it.

Slowly she uncurled as Remus sniffed his daughter and recognized her scent, having marked her as a baby just in case anything like this ever happened, before licking her neck as well.

Kara met her father's lupine eyes and giggled, her fear dissipating. "It's a doggy, Mama."

Suddenly Remus growled deep in his throat, making Kara recoil against her mother.

Justin had reappeared, not able to leave Hermione and Kara alone, but upon seeing that Remus wasn't attacking them and had turned his attention back to him, after grabbing one of his wands up from the floor, he once again changed and disappeared back under the cupboard.

However, Remus' growling didn't end with Justin's disappearance and instead grew louder. For a moment Hermione wondered what was going on until a werewolf bigger than anything she had ever seen before burst into the room. "Oh God!"

As Remus leapt on to the much bigger werewolf and they became a mass of snarling fur heading in their direction, Hermione knew she had no choice and blew a hole in the wall of the building, hurrying out of it to face the mass of Death Eaters out there, yelling out to them as she did, "Please don't fire spells at us, I have a child."

As he spotted the child in Hermione's arms, Tom yelled out, "Hold your fire" to the men at his side, all of them immediately obeying.

Tom then beckoned to Hermione. "I suggest you come over here unless you wish to become werewolf fodder."

Hermione didn't and she ran towards him, honestly believing that while he would no doubt kill her, he might show some mercy towards her daughter... at least she hoped so.

As the fight between Remus and Hagrid raged on in what was rapidly becoming a ruin, Tom erected shields and took in the sight of the dark-haired girl with the green eyes that Hermione was holding protectively against her. He did, of course, jump to the wrong conclusion. "Mrs. Potter and daughter, I presume."

It was at that instant that both Hermione and Sirius, who was standing next to Tom, discovered that their own organization was a good deal more watertight than both of them had believed a few minutes earlier, especially given Tom's unexplained breach of their security.

Pushing her shoulders back, although she was frightened, Hermione looked Tom in the eye as her arms tightened even more around her daughter. "Do whatever you want to me but I'm begging you, please don't harm my daughter."

Tom ran a hand over Kara's head, making her bury her face deeper into her mother's shoulder. "Now why would I want to harm such valuable hostages, hostages for whom I'm sure Harry Potter would be only too willing to trade himself."

Hermione closed her eyes in despair, well aware that Harry would have done it for any of his friends, but more so to save his beloved goddaughter, who loved Harry as much as he loved her.

Tom laughed at the gesture of anguish. "I thought as much." He then barked out an order to Dae, who was standing beside Sirius. "Altus, take them to my home. They're not to be harmed – put them in Lucius' old suite."

Tom then turned his attention back to the fight that was ongoing between Remus and Hagrid. He didn't believe it would last much longer, Remus being considerably outweighed by Hagrid. When Remus collapsed to the ground and Hagrid turned looking for other prey, Tom decided that Hagrid's usefulness had come to an end. "Kill it."

Hagrid stood no chance as numerous Killing Curses impacted his furry body and he flew through the air to hit the ground with a thud.

Tom then addressed Sirius. "Check on their bodies. I want to make sure they're dead."

Dodging a few stray spells, with everyone else keeping their distance, Sirius headed over to where Hagrid was lying, taking out his wand and running it over him. A black cloud appeared moments later. "He's dead."

He then cast his wand over Remus, the same black cloud appearing. "He's dead too."

"Then dispose of the vermin," Tom ordered. "Burn them."

Feeling sickened, Sirius had little choice but to follow Tom's orders, the Imperius Potion that still ran through his veins kicking in. Aiming his wand at Hagrid, Sirius said a silent goodbye before igniting his body. Then, as slowly as he could, he turned his wand back towards Remus' body. As he did, he was blasted off his feet. By the time he'd regained his footing, Remus' body had vanished. As he erected a shield and struggled to his feet, Sirius had no idea that Remus' body had been saved thanks to Lucy and her fortuitous escape with Luna and Will, although things for them hadn't been an easy ride...

As Lucy left the medical building, she turned sharply sideways, tilting all of them so that they were looking down at the roof as they flew over it, Justin's sticking spell being the only thing that was keeping them on the broomstick.

It had been a good move on Lucy's part as spells flew into the air where they would have been if she had simply flown straight up.

As they came under fire, Luna managed to free her arm and pulled out her wand, erecting an umbrella shield around them. As they skimmed along low to the ground, she squealed out loud when Lucy suddenly swerved, although Luna knew why – they had just encountered wards.

She kept her wand out as Death Eaters on broomsticks began to fly into the area, picking off Aurors on the ground and then taking on the flying squadrons that had taken to the air to try to defend those on the ground. Things began to get hairy when those on broomsticks vanished and a potluck air battle began with spells flying thick and fast.

Lucy yelped as one of the spells impacted Luna's shield. It had saved them that time but it had also given them away and she had to dodge and weave as spells came seemingly out of thin air towards them in spite of the fact that they too were invisible.

As a green curse narrowly missed them, Lucy decided that in spite of her reservations, she had to use the broomstick to its full potential and she therefore aimed her wand at the broomstick, cancelling the silencing spell. "Luna, I'm going to speed, so hold on tight – I'm not sure if the sticking spell will hold."

With Will sandwiched between her and Lucy and not showing the slightest bit of fear, Luna yelled back, "Do it." Luna then grabbed tightly around Lucy's waist and bent over as she did, Will moving forward in conjunction with her.

All three of them screamed, Luna and Lucy with fear and Will with delight, as they shot forward and then up into the air, Lucy hoping that the wards had no ceiling – they did and so she shot back downwards and headed towards the sea, relieved when the wards seemed to fizzle out at the shoreline. However, they'd barely gone more than twenty feet over the water when a massive boom rang

out as two spells hit the shield simultaneously and Will gave a pain filled cry. Just as he collapsed forward, the broomstick bucked beneath them and stopped flying, sending both it and its passengers hurtling towards the ocean below.

As she and the other two tumbled through the air towards the ocean, Lucy operated her emergency portkey. "Potter Sanctum Potter."

Upon arrival, all three of them hit the ground hard, the momentum of their fall carrying them to a harder than usual portkey landing. Lucy heard a bone snapping but with no sensation of pain guessed it was either Luna or Will who had been affected, both of them landing under Lucy. Giving a cry for help, Lucy scrambled off the pair.

Hearing the yell, Harry came dashing in together with Ron, Dudley and Neville. "What happened?"

"We were attacked," Lucy said, quickly pulling out her wand as Harry lifted his son off Luna.

"Oh no!"

Will was bleeding heavily from a back wound but it was Luna's condition that had prompted Neville's sad exclamation.

Lucy began to check Luna over but she knew before she'd even begun that she was too late, a gaping hole now residing where Luna's heart and lung should have been. "There's nothing I can do for her. The shot went straight through her."

"Then look after Will," Harry said, having stopped his son's back wound from bleeding.

While a pale faced Ron lifted Luna on to a sofa and covered her up with a blanket, Lucy took an unconscious Will from his father and began to heal the wound on his back. She also had to heal a broken bone in his left arm. "I'm going to need to keep him sedated while his lung repairs itself. Fortunately for him, poor Luna took the blunt of the blast."

Harry waited impatiently while Lucy swiftly dealt with Will before asking Neville to transport his unconscious son to his bedroom. A

concerned and somewhat upset Harry then took Lucy to task. "What the hell happened just happened to my son and Luna?"

"We were attacked," Lucy said, her voice shaking as her close call finally began to register now that she was no longer running on adrenalin.

"I thought he was going to Seashore with Luna and Hermione," Harry said, trying to get to the bottom of things.

"He did," Lucy confirmed. "He came in with Luna and Hermione and Kara. A few minutes before they arrived, Anna Jameson had brought someone named Hagrid in after she'd made him swear an oath and checked him for portkeys."

"Hagrid?" Harry asked in surprise. "How did he get out of Tom's clutches?"

"Justin rescued him from the Forbidden Forest, and we thought Hagrid had escaped of his own free will but it was a trap – I don't know how yet but it was. Tom and his men turned up and he used some sort of spell to turn day into night, a night with a full moon. Remus and Hagrid both changed. We argued about who should go and in the end Justin, Hermione and Kara remained in the medical bay; Kara refused to let go of her mother and Hermione's not a good flier."

Harry knew that only too well. "Okay, so how did you get out? I can't imagine Tom not erecting wards."

"He did, even above us, but the wards died out at the shoreline but I don't know why."

"I think I do," Harry said, having attended basic warding classes given by Bill Weasley as part of Harry's obligations as an Unspeakable. "The waves move back and forth..."

Ron, who'd also attended the same classes, excitedly interrupted Harry. "Tom must have tried to set up a ward to the edge of the beach, it can't latch on – he should have done it several miles out where, although it swells, the ocean is always effectively a fixed point."

"I get that but why did the broomstick stop working?"

"Because although Justin let you use it," Harry said, "once you got too far away from him it believed it was being stolen and stopped working."

"I didn't think of that," Lucy said, as she used a cleansing spell on her hands. "And Justin obviously didn't either."

"I bet I wouldn't have either if I was being attacked," Ron said, pointing out the reason Justin hadn't told Lucy of the potential problem.

"I'm going to help," Harry said, quickly checking his wands, before mounting the broomstick.

Lucy tried to stop him. "We were being overrun and it's going to be a bloodbath out there, Harry. I don't see what you can do."

"I'm going to do whatever I can," Harry said, his face darkening. "My friends are out there."

Dudley didn't think this any better of an idea. "Harry, you might be killed."

"I'm still going," Harry said in a determined voice as he checked his wands one final time and prepared to disappear. As he did, Ron grabbed his arm and vanished with him.

Aware of what they were heading into and feeling more than a little panicked inside, Lucy reached into her pocket and withdrew a small purple bag, pulling out several vials of potion from within it. "I need this. Anyone else?"

Neville, who'd just returned from dealing with Will, nodded and took one, as did Dudley. "So where's Harry?"

"Gone to see if he can help," Lucy said, her voice shaky. "And Ron went with him."

"Then I should be there as well," Neville bravely said.

"You're crapper than Hermione is at flying," Dudley said rudely.

"But..."

"You're staying here," Lucy said in a voice that brooked no argument. "I'm going to need help to set up some sort of receiving area."

"Do you really think anyone is going to survive?" Neville asked as he reluctantly followed Lucy out of the hallway and toward the conservatory.

"I don't know but I have to consider the possibility," Lucy said. "The new bay at Tabernacle is up and running but I'm afraid it, and the smaller ancillary bay at Barnstable, might also be under attack. So for the time being we can use the conservatory but we'll need to strip back some of the planting and replace it with linoleum flooring before I sanitize it."

"What about Julian?" Neville asked, thinking about the young man who was currently at work in his Muggle workplace in Manchester.

"Julian doesn't need to know yet," Lucy said, although her heart ached for what she had to tell her eldest child about his beloved wife. "We have enough to deal with. We can deal with our grief later."

Meanwhile, Harry and Ron had appeared out over the ocean and, after helping Ron on to the broomstick, Harry surveyed the smoke pouring out from the buildings at Seashore. Invoking an invisibility spell, he yelled behind him, "Hold tight."

Ron did exactly that, loving the sensation as they soared across the water and headed for Seashore. When they got there, they accessed the fluctuating wards without a problem, both of them horrified by what they saw below.

The fight that had begun between Remus and Hagrid had just come to an end and Tom was ordering Hagrid's death.

As Sirius was ordered to destroy the bodies, Harry whispered to Ron, "We can't let him destroy Remus' body. I'll distract Sirius and you deal with Remus. As soon as you get his body, get him the hell out of here."

Agreeing, Ron clung on tightly as Harry shot down towards Remus' body at a speed even Ron hadn't known the broomstick was capable of. As Hagrid's body went up in flames at Sirius' hand, Harry had landed, the stopping force throwing both him and Ron off the broomstick and on to the ground, although Ron managed to roll straight up on to his feet.

As Sirius was blasted away by Harry, Ron hurriedly cast an invisibility spell on Remus' body, taking a step away from it as he did so and tripping over Harry's invisible broomstick. It was a move that was to save Ron's life as all those with Tom took aim at and around the spot where Ron had just been standing.

Quickly working out why he'd fallen, Ron began to grope around for the broomstick and, once he'd located it, he quietly summoned Remus' invisible body, stifling a gasp as it barreled into him. After a few awkward moments, Ron managed to get Remus' spell lightened body over the broomstick and, after using a sticking spell on it, he too mounted the broomstick and took off.

Deciding to ignore Harry's orders, Ron tried to locate him by skimming across the ground to see if he ran into him but he was kicking up sand as he did so.

Aware that someone was obviously there, Tom reinforced his shielding and sent spells flying towards the disturbance.

As he swerved to avoid a spell, afraid he was going to get hit, Ron had to give up on his quest to find Harry and he shot up into the air and headed for the ocean.

Having followed Ron's path towards the ocean, Tom knew that someone must have breached the wards there, although he didn't know how. Angered, he furiously snapped out, "I want a final sweep of this area. If anyone is still alive, I want them taken back to the cells for interrogation. I want to know if they have any other bases. Tell Altus he can begin interrogating anyone brought in."

Potter Place

Ron reappeared in the middle of the conservatory, dropping the invisibility spells as he hovered above the ground on the broomstick,

which bucked once and then dropped to the ground, Harry no longer in close proximity to it.

Lucy rushed forward to deal with Remus. "He's a mess."

As Neville helped Ron to his feet, Ron gave her the bad news. "You're too late, Lucy. He's dead. Hagrid killed him before Tom's men killed Hagrid."

"Are you sure he's dead?" Lucy didn't want a fully grown werewolf suddenly regaining consciousness and attacking everyone.

Ron nodded. "I saw the black cloud as Sirius checked him and Hagrid. He was going to burn their bodies. Harry wouldn't let that happen to Remus, so Harry attacked Sirius while I got Remus' body."

Dudley, who had become good friends with Harry as well as Ron since moving into Potter Place, gave a sound of distress. "Is he...?"

"No," Ron said, running a trembling hand over his sweaty face, his voice cracking. "But I had... had to leave him behind – we couldn't hold on when he was landing to get Remus and, although I found the broomstick, I couldn't locate Harry."

Harry had had no intention of leaving with Ron and at that moment he was doing his best to make contact with Sirius.

As he aimed his wand at his injured side, Sirius suddenly heard 'Padfoot' being hissed at him, and he knew it had to be someone on his side given Remus' body's disappearance, but he couldn't quite tell who it was, although he suspected it was Harry.

Far enough behind Tom to respond without being overheard, Sirius quietly hissed back, "Keep right behind me and stay in my footprints."

The sweeps had barely begun when Tom's attention was caught by a Death Eater running over to him and bowing. "My Lord, we've got a prisoner we're not sure whether we should transport or not."

"I thought I made myself clear," Tom said, before he stopped the man from leaving as he realized that most of his men wouldn't be as

stupid as to countermand his orders without good reason. "Why not?"

"She said she's your wife."

"Renovo, you're with me," Tom ordered.

As he accompanied Tom, Sirius was thankful that he'd not only taken the opportunity to make Cammie swear an oath but for the fact that he'd also obliterated her of her memory of him.

Behind Sirius, Harry continued to carefully dog his footsteps and so bore witness to the exchange between Tom and Cammie...

She was a pathetic sight as they entered the cells and had obviously been crying. Spotting Tom, she scrambled to her feet. "Tom!"

"Not so quickly," Tom said, still not sure if this was his wife or not. Handing her his spare wand, he kept his main wand trained on Cammie, taking the same precautions as Remus and Anna usually did when someone's identity was in question. "Swear an oath you are who you say you are. If you don't do it, I'll kill you where you stand."

Cammie made the necessary oath and immediately told him what she believed had happened to her, her voice trembling, "Tom, I went into labor early. They took our baby away and then came back and told me she was... she was..." Unable to finish, Cammie began to sob and Tom put his arm around her.

"I'm going to make them pay for letting her die," Tom snarled finishing the sentence for himself, and he turned to Sirius. "I want everyone we've rounded up put to death."

Sirius tried to sway Tom. "But how will we discover if they have any other bases if we do that?"

Tom turned to his wife. "Do you remember anything?"

"I can't tell you anything other than what happened to my baby," Cammie sobbed.

"An oath," Tom muttered, not bothering to ask his wife why she had sworn one. "Very well. I want two of the prisoners kept alive to be questioned. The rest are to be executed."

"Yes, my Lord," Sirius said and he headed off back towards where a group of about twenty Aurors were huddled together on the beach, their hands secured by rope.

Getting as close to Sirius as he could, Harry quietly whispered a spell that was directed towards Sirius' ears only. "Can you save them?"

"No," Sirius hissed back after deftly casting a similar spell. "I'd blow my cover. You'll have to do it."

"Don't ask much do you?" Harry snarked.

"Nope," Sirius said, before falling silent as he reached the huddle of prisoners. "Is this all of them?"

"Yes, Renovo."

Sirius scanned the group, his heart falling as he spotted more than one familiar face. He now had some tough choices to make and he quickly began to run through his options.

Harry guessed what Sirius was doing, and his words tickled Sirius' ear as they reached him. "Pick Bill."

Pointing to Bill Weasley, who Harry obviously believed would hold up to torture, Sirius quietly said, "Take him."

He was now faced with a terrible decision. Justin was amongst those sitting on the ground as were Sophia Viking and Anna Jameson. Sirius didn't know if he had the right to choose Justin over the two women simply because he was his son, and he also didn't know if he could put Justin through hell again.

Harry again offered up some advice, although it pained him to do so. "They'll rape any women as part of their torture, you know that. Better they die quickly. Choose Justin. You know he can take it."

With Sirius hesitating as he considered Harry's words, one of the Death Eaters asked, "And the rest of them, Renovo?"

Sirius knew he was being selfish but he couldn't let Justin die if he had an outside chance of saving his son. "Take him and kill the rest."

Chapter 78: Trade Off

Justin, though, being Justin, didn't take his father's decision lightly. "No! Save one of the women instead of me."

It was Sophia who stopped him from protesting further, reiterating what Harry had whispered to Sirius. "They're saving no-one, Justin. They're going to torture and kill whomever they take. And to be honest, I'd rather die here than have one of these assholes rape and then kill me."

It was then that Harry realized they might have a chance to save Sophia too and, under cover of the spell he'd cast to send his words only to Sirius, Harry hurriedly said, "Pretend you're going to punish her for her outburst and get her out of here."

Sirius could see the men watching him and waiting for his response, and he decided that Harry's idea could be made to work.

"Lady, you should have kept your mouth shut." He turned to the men holding Justin and Bill. "Take them away. I'm going to deal with her in private. As I said, you can kill the rest. Just make sure I'm out of range before you do though. I don't wish to be hit in the back by a stray spell. I'd hate to have to teach any of you a lesson."

Sirius knew only too well that some of the men were far from keen on him, several of them having undergone Sirius' 'lessons' before, and, given an excuse, they'd probably try to kill him if they could. Watching as Sirius cast a shielding spell over himself, two of those guarding the prisoners lowered their wands as a result of Sirius' actions, making Justin want to giggle at their obvious fear of his father, although his reaction stemmed more from nerves than from gaiety.

Sirius' order had not only stopped his men from attempting to use friendly fire on him, but had also given Harry a little time to try to help those Sirius had left behind to die. Making the most of the window, Harry cast a similar spell to the one he'd used so that Sirius could hear him; the only difference this time was that it was sent out to the group of twenty prisoners. Unfortunately Justin and Bill were too close to their guards for Harry to forewarn them.

"Don't move or give any indication that I'm about to free your hands," Harry said softly, the spell carrying his barely audible words to the ears of those on ground. "When the first spell flies from my wand, it's up to you to do the best you can to escape. I've dropped the minor wards around you and the main wards die out at the shore; head that way. I'll do whatever I can to shield you. Jameson, I'll throw you my spare wand so that you can cover our right side as I'll be on the left."

As Sirius reached the nearest building, Harry knew the time had come and he let loose with his first spell...

Sirius ignored the sounds of screams and exchanged spell fire as he tugged Sophia around the corner of a building and she quietly said, "Thank you."

"You created your own escape and may have helped your friends," Sirius said, before going on to explain. "Harry is here and that firefight is being led by him."

"He'll never be able to take that many down," Sophia said worriedly.

"That won't stop him trying, and to be honest we don't have time to discuss it," Sirius said before giving her instructions. "You need to finish off the Abrogo potion I left in stasis and administer it to Tom's baby. It doesn't matter who her parents end up being."

"Why the urgency?"

"Scream for me first," Sirius instructed.

Sophia did so, adding a few choice expletives as well, before quietly hissing at him, "Why?"

"Because Tom has found Cam."

"Ignotus was supposed to be dealing with her transfer just before this happened."

"He obviously got caught up here first," Sirius said, wincing as Sophia screamed without his requesting her to do so. "Ouch!"

"Just keeping it real," Sophia reminded him. "So you think Tom will enact a familial spell?"

"He won't take Cam at her word since she didn't see the baby's body."

"But why bother at all?"

"Because I refuse to hand a child back to that monster," Sirius said vehemently, "and I'm afraid of what Tom might do to Hermione and Kara if he learns we lied about his child dying. He's going to use them to lure Harry in."

Sophia had seen them arriving earlier in the day but had had no idea that they'd survived. "Don't you think letting him know she survived might provide some sort of bargaining chip and might help Harry?"

"I suppose," Sirius acknowledged. "Talk it over with the others but right now we're running out of time; I going to act as if I'd killed you as I don't want others trying to rape you. The wards will drop the moment Tom leaves as I can't imagine there's much to keep us here now."

"You mean now that almost everyone who was on duty is dead."

"Yes," Sirius said, his voice full of regret. "I'm sorry I couldn't save more. And I'm sorry about Lucy. I know she was here."

"I don't blame you, and at least some of those with me might have made it thanks to you and Harry," Sophia said, squeezing his arm to try and comfort him, even though she was trying hard not to cry herself. "Now I'd better lie down and play dead."

"Soph, give me one final scream please."

After Sophia gave one final scream, Sirius yelled out, "Avada Kedavra" before walking away and rejoining Tom, who was about to round the corner of the building.

"I was just dealing with a little problem," Sirius said before Tom could say anything.

"So I was told," Tom said as he turned and started walking back in the direction of where Sirius had taken Sophia from, "although I didn't think rape was one of your favorite pastimes."

As they reached the area the prisoners had been held in, Sirius' heart sank at the sight of the bodies strewn about the ground, although there weren't as many as there could have been. He also noticed the bodies of all of the Death Eaters who'd been guarding the prisoners, before Sirius realized that Tom was looking expectantly at him. "The mouthy bitch had it coming, and I'd have lost face if I hadn't reacted as I did."

"You could have offered her to the men instead."

Sirius acknowledged the comment. "True but I've been in China for months and had an itch to scratch."

"Is that a dig at me?"

"No, but I'll be honest and say that it was no picnic."

"That's why I won't be sending you to Russia. I've decided that Magnus can tackle the job. He can earn his place at my side." Tom walked along with Sirius as he surveyed the ruins of the burned out camp site. "After we conduct one final sweep, I'd like you to take a look at Cam when we get back, if you wouldn't mind. Jack's a good healer but you're the best."

Sirius didn't bother asking if that was the case then why the hell had Tom sent him away. Instead he agreed to do as he was asked, relieved that he would soon be leaving the sight of so many bodies behind him.

Potter Place

Cordelia jumped up as Sophia suddenly appeared in front of them and relayed what had happened. "They've killed everyone. Sirius helped me to escape but he told his men to take Justin and Bill as prisoners to interrogate."

Lester expressed his dismay. "How could he put Justin through that again? He's supposed to love him."

Sophia defended Sirius. "He does. At least this way Justin has a chance." She then told them about the baby. "I don't know what to do. The baby gives us a bargaining chip but we'll be sending her into hell if we hand her over. I don't know if we have that right."

"Justin and Bill wouldn't want that," Lucy said, although her heart was sinking as she said it.

"I know but it's not just them in danger," Sophia said. "Tom has Hermione and Kara and intends to use them to bargain for Harry but I'm not sure he survived."

"Then you have to make the exchange," Lester said immediately.

"It's not as easy as that," Lucy said.

"It's not your daughter who's out there," Lester complained.

"No, but it's my husband," Lucy snapped. "And my daughter almost lost her life. I'm sorry, Lester, but I don't think we should hand Tom's baby back not even to save Hermione and Kara. As much as I hate to say it, we'll just have to hope Harry is willing to trade himself for them if he made it."

"And I will," a familiar voice said.

"Harry, you made it!" Sophia cried.

"As did your boss and seven other Aurors," Harry said, but his face was grave. "We lost four the moment I opened fire. I did my best but..."

"Harry, we'd have lost more if you hadn't helped."

"I know but it doesn't make it any easier," Harry said, before returning to the subject of Hermione and Kara. "And I agree with Lucy. We can't hand the baby back. Tom would probably swap one hostage for her and still ask for me. He knows we'd never harm a baby, but if he doesn't know she's survived, I might be enough to get both Hermione and Kara back."

"And if you're not enough?" Lester barked, still angry at the decision.

"Then I'm certain that Hermione would agree with me that Kara and the baby have to come first," Harry said, before turning his back on Lester to ask Lucy a question. "Will you finish the potion?"

Lucy had other concerns. "Is anyone dealing with the injured?"

"Kelly Manners at Tabernacle, which is where we all disappeared."

"She's only a junior healer," Lucy said worriedly. "Sophia can finish the potion."

"They'll be glad to see you but overall the injuries are mostly minor."

"Mostly?"

"I got hit by a concussive spell and might have a few cracked ribs," Harry admitted. "It hurts like hell when I breathe."

"Damn fool," Lucy muttered as she ran her wand over him. "Yes, you do."

"Just strap me up."

"I'll go finish the potion," Sophia said, and she vanished.

After doing a little more than Harry asked, Lucy finally declared he was free to go. "I'm leaving for Tabernacle."

"I'll go check on Sophia," Harry said, and he was about to walk away when Lucy handed him a couple of vials of calming potion. "Um, I'm good."

"Sophia might not be," Lucy pointed out. "She's been running on adrenalin up until now."

"Of course."

A crack sounded before either of them could leave and a dripping wet Justin appeared. He barely had time to dry himself before he was enfolded in his mother's arm. "Mum, I'm okay."

"But you might not have been."

"I know," Justin acknowledged, gently prying his tearful but happy mother away. "Is Bethany okay?"

"She's with Tonks and doesn't know what's happened," Lucy said, relieved to see that like her daughter, Cordie's child had returned safely.

"We should tell them," Justin decreed, before asking, "How many others escaped?"

"Eight," Harry said. "I was too caught up with the fighting to look for you."

"I realized I didn't stand chance of getting to the water alive if I ran, so I tried changing into my Animagus form, although to be honest I didn't expect it to work."

"I dropped the wards," Harry said as he answered Justin's unasked question.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help Bill. I know he didn't have an Animagus form," Justin said, looking sadly at Lucy.

"He'd rather you be safe than risk yourself to save him," Lucy said, speaking again for her absentee husband. "If you'll excuse me I need to head to Tabernacle."

"I'll come with you," Ron said, wanting to do more than simply standing around.

Justin, however, dismissed his offer as Lucy vanished. "You should inform Tonks and Bethany of the situation. Then you can follow Lucy. I'll meet you there shortly."

Ron disappeared and Harry headed to join Sophia.

On joining her, Harry asked, "Will it take long?"

"It depends on how far along Sirius had gotten," Sophia said, having taken a little time to track down what she believed to be the Abrogo potion as well as the book that outlined how to brew it. "And I'm not a hundred per cent sure it's this one." Sophia was skimming through the instructions as she spoke.

"It should smell like lavender," Harry offered up, having helped with the potion when he'd adopted Will.

Putting down the book, Sophia sniffed after removing the stasis smell. "It's lavender." As she lit the burner under the cauldron, she brought up a good point. "Who's going to act as her parents?"

"I am and if you wouldn't mind, I think you should act as her mother."

Sophia went red. "But you..."

Harry didn't want her to get the wrong idea. "I'm only asking as I think we're probably the two most level headed people here at the moment, except maybe for Justin, and I'm not entirely sure Bethany would like it if he adopted the baby without asking first, which might take some time. So no matter what you think, it has to be us."

Sophia added borage to the potion, determining it hadn't been added as it had been in a sealed container together with the potion. "Okay, but I have to say that I'm concerned about the baby and her future. If I agree to it, then until you find someone else to get together with I'll effectively be her mother."

"Actually Sirius is planning to take over her care when all this is over."

"Harry, it might never be over."

"You can't think that," Harry said, although he knew she was right. "But if you do and you don't want..."

"I didn't say I wouldn't do it; I just wanted to be clear about my reservations."

"Soph, if you don't want to do this, just say."

"I do," Sophia said, before slightly changing the subject. "Since Sirius isn't here, what are we going to call her?"

"Luna," said Harry without reservation.

"Luna will love that."

Harry handed over a calming potion. "You might want to take this."

"I'm fine," Sophia protested.

"Luna didn't make it, Sophia," Harry said gently.

Sophia almost stopped stirring; like everyone else, she'd adored the quirky blonde her brother had married. "What happened?"

Harry told her, glad that Sophia had stopped to take the calming potion. "Julian doesn't know yet. Your mum said there was enough time to tell him later."

"She's right," Sophia said, taking a shuddering deep breath just as the potion gave a tiny pop. "I think it's ready."

"Do you want to pick her middle name?"

"Harriet, after you," Sophia said. "I think Sirius would like that."

"I'm not so sure," Harry said as he placed a blank piece of parchment on the table.

"I am," Sophia said, and not giving Harry a chance to protest again she dripped potion on to the parchment and spoke aloud the baby's new name. "Well, I suppose that's it then."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief when his name and Sophia's appeared as the baby's new parents together with the baby's name. He was, however, unable to miss the look on Sophia's face as she rolled up the parchment. "What's up?"

"Don't you feel guilty about doing this?"

"No, do you?"

"A little," Sophia admitted. "But it's more because I feel sorry for her former mother. It must be terrible to think you've lost your baby."

"Better to think she's lost her daughter like this than to lose her to the Dark Arts," Harry said, a hint of bitterness edging into his voice.

"It doesn't seem to affect you," Sophia said, before remembering Harry's meltdown of years previously. "At least now."

"It could if I let it," Harry admitted. "There are times, like today, when I used some seriously dark spells to get us out of that mess, when I could have just let my darker side take over totally but I was afraid of hurting those on our side if I did. I still don't exactly remember the last time I let go and attacked Luna's first husband and it scares me."

"Then I'm glad you didn't." Not wanting to make Harry dwell on what he'd done, Sophia decided that a slight change of subject was in order. "I think that perhaps I should report in. Commander Jameson might need my help."

"She was hit with a concussive spell just as I was," Harry informed her. "Nothing major but she seemed a little out of things when we got back. And if anywhere could do with your help, it's here."

"But nothing's happening, and if Commander Jameson is down, my help might be needed."

"Soph, there are plenty of Aurors senior to you to take over and it's here that Sirius will come first and report. I thought you might like to stay for news of your stepfather."

"I already know he's not going to make it," Sophia said, her lip trembling but she was unable to cry thanks to the calming potion. "And I think Mum knows it too."

"I'm sorry I couldn't get to him."

"I know..."

Harry let out a sigh as he thought about someone else who had fallen victim. "I need to see if Remus' body... I mean Remus has been taken care of."

"Why does that asshole always win, Harry?" Sophia asked as she followed Harry upstairs.

"He doesn't always win," Harry said. "We have his daughter."

"But he's going to get you."

Harry shrugged. "If it saves Hermione and Kara, then that's good with me."

"You're not afraid?"

"I am," Harry said truthfully. "I know what Tom's capable of and it terrifies the hell out of me. But if I start thinking about it then I might never do what I know I should."

"I don't believe you," Sophia said vehemently. "You always try to do the right thing."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Harry gave a half smile as they reached the conservatory, where he could see the shape of a body covered with a sheet.

Justin was waiting for him. "I really need to see what's happening at Tabernacle and Barnstable but I wanted to help you with Remus before I do."

"Thanks," Harry said, glad of Justin's support.

"Of course," Justin said, following Harry as Harry aimed his wand at Remus and then maneuvered him towards the doors. "We'll put him in the blue room. No-one's in there, is there?"

"No," Harry said, before he halted. "Is Luna still in the sitting room?"

Neville nodded. "Should we put her in with Remus?"

Justin stopped walking in shock as he learned about his former girlfriend. Nobody had said anything and he'd simply thought she was with the children. "Luna's dead?"

Harry reached out with his free hand and squeezed Justin's arm. "She took a spell in the back and it went straight through her. She saved Will's life."

Choked up, Justin simply nodded and followed Harry out of the room.

A few minutes later, Dudley offered to make some tea, but his yell after leaving the room led to Neville and Sophia dashing into the hallway to join him, all expecting to see that Bill had died but instead what they saw was that Harry's hand on the Weasley clock had moved.

Dudley put into words what they were all thinking. "Uh, if Harry's upstairs, then why is he in mortal danger?"

Swiftly guessing why, Sophia didn't hesitate and she disappeared upstairs, gasping with horror at the sight in front of her: Justin was unconscious on the floor and an obviously dazed Harry was lying beside him. Pulling her wand, Sophia screamed out, "Stupefy!"

The spell barely touched the werewolf, who turned angrily on her.

Scrambling to his feet, and blood pouring from a bite on his arm, Harry used a much stronger spell than Sophia had. "Reducto."

Remus yelped loudly and turned back on Harry far more quickly than Harry had anticipated, leaping and locking his jaw around Harry's throat.

Neville appeared at that moment, and sent another spell at the werewolf. The werewolf gave a howl of pain as it was thrown backwards and a hole was blown in its chest. Even so, it still got to its feet.

"Confringo."

Remus was blasted away from Harry yet again, growling angrily at the loss his prey.

Sophia yelled, "Both of us together."

She and Neville turned their wands on Remus, who had turned to attack Harry again, intent on using what little strength he had left in finishing off his prey.

"Stupefy!"

Neville then aimed his wand at Remus once more, chains flying out and shackling him to the wall. "I'm not sure how long that will last.

We need to get Lucy and I'll try to stop his throat from bleeding. I'll get Justin out of the way."

Sophia vanished and reappeared with her mother who pushed Neville aside. "I thought Ron said he was dead."

Neville felt nauseous at the amount of the blood coming from his friend. "He thought he was."

"Somehow he got it wrong," Lucy barked as she worked on Harry's throat. "I need four blood replenishing potions."

Sophia disappeared again, grabbed some, and returned them to her mother, helping her by administering the potions, while Lucy gently rubbed Harry's throat, trying not to rip open the wounds she had just sealed up.

Then she ran her wand over Harry, shakily declaring, "He'll survive. Let's get him on to a bed downstairs."

It was only as Lucy made Harry comfortable that Sophia noticed her mother's hands. "Mum, you're not wearing gloves..."

In her rush to save Harry's life, Lucy hadn't thought about the situation and she dropped her wand in horror. "Shit! Everyone get away from me. I want this blood cleaned up."

Neville, who was thankful he hadn't had time to touch Harry's throat, dealt with the clean-up of the small amount of blood that had escaped since Harry's transfer to the conservatory, including dealing with Lucy's hands after taking the precaution of putting on gloves. "Do you think you're infected?"

"I don't know," Lucy said, picking up her sanitized wand. "I can safely say Harry is though. I need to change."

Lucy then vanished, returning a short time later in fresh clothing, having banished her bloodstained uniform and quickly showering. "Any incoming here?"

"Nothing," Sophia said, before she walked out to the hallway. "And the hands haven't changed, except for Harry's."

"I need to check on Will again," Lucy said, before she remembered her final orders. "Did you deal with the adoption?"

"Yes," Sophia said, following her mother. "I'm her mother for the time being and Harry is acting as her father until Sirius can take over."

"You?" Lucy asked in surprise.

"Who else was there to ask? You were at Tabernacle, Mum, and Cordie was too busy comforting Lester to ask, and I doubt Lester would have agreed to it anyway after Hermione's abduction."

"We can sort it out later," Lucy said as she walked into Will's bedroom to discover that both Cordie and Lester were sitting with an unconscious Will.

Lester looked over as Lucy came in, his face full of hope. "Is anyone else back yet?"

"No, but Uncle Bill is still alive, at least according to the Weasley family clock he is," Sophia said.

Suddenly a mournful howl echoed through the house and Lester winced. "He doesn't sound happy." It was then that it clicked. "I thought Remus was dead."

"So did Ron," Sophia said, before explaining what had happened.

Upon hearing another obviously pain-filled howl, Lucy began fretting. "I wish I could get in there to check on him."

"You can't risk it, Mum, so we're going to have to wait it out," Sophia said, not willing to risk another attack on anyone or damaging Remus any further.

"But for how long?" Lucy asked her. "We have no idea how long a manufactured change takes to disperse."

"I'll go in," Neville offered, having joined them. "I can disapparate straight back out if he hasn't changed back into human form."

Sophia grabbed his arm. "Don't do it."

"Said the girl who fearlessly apparated up there the first time," Neville said to Sophia.

Sophia's cheeks flushed a bright red. "It's my job, Neville, and to be honest I wasn't thinking, just acting."

"This time then, let's think," Dudley said, before offering up a suggestion. "Jump into the bathroom. You mightn't land right on top of him that way."

After casting an eavesdropping spell on the room, Neville listened carefully before doing as Dudley had suggested and apparating into the bathroom.

Outside the room, Dudley, Lucy and Sophia waited nervously, Lucy jumping when the door swung open and, after ten minutes had gone by, Neville poked his head out.

"He's finally changed back but he's bleeding really badly, Lucy."

Neville's words had been an understatement and, hurrying into the room, Lucy began to work on Remus, kneeling in the massive pool of blood that was spreading out over the carpet. "I need five vials of blood replenishing potion, painkiller and a clotting agent – now!"

Sophia vanished and reappeared, handing the items to her mother, but taking care not to touch her.

Watching from the doorway, Dudley guessed it had to be bad when Lucy fed Remus the potions, before aiming her wand at his chest and screaming out, "Revivio".

After the eighth attempt, Neville put a hand on Lucy's shoulder, taking care not to touch her bare skin. "He's really gone this time, Lucy."

"I've been through this before with him and this son of a bitch isn't dying on me now anymore than he did that time," Lucy barked out, shaking off Neville's hand. "Stand back."

A bright light leapt from Lucy's wand and into Remus' chest, the smell of burning flesh making everyone gag and Remus' body lifted up from the ground before he began screaming.

As she had when she had used the same spell on him before, Lucy ignored the screaming to quickly treat the burn that covered Remus' chest. "Sedative."

Sophia, who had thought ahead, handed one over but then she ended up kneeling down and holding Remus' head so that Lucy could administer it, Remus thrashing about too much for her to do it alone. Sophia let out a cry as Remus hit out and broke her nose, her blood running down her face and dripping down on to Remus' body.

Then Remus went still and Lucy disappeared, taking both Sophia and Remus with her.

Laurifer Manor

Cam was tucked up in bed when Sirius entered the room and removed his mask. "Hello, Cam."

"Simon, how are you?"

"Well," Sirius said casually, although he was a little on edge in Cam's presence just in case his memory spell hadn't worked, even though Cam hadn't recoiled upon seeing him. "Tom's asked me to take a look at you."

Tears started to run down Cam's cheeks. "You won't be able to change anything."

"I know," Sirius said in a soothing voice, the terrible guilt Harry had mentioned now hitting him full force at the sight of the distraught woman in front of him. "But I still need to check that you're otherwise in good health."

"Knock yourself out."

Sirius scanned her quickly with his wand, well aware that she would be in excellent health. "You seem to have healed nicely."

"That's all you can say..." Cammie snapped, her hand covering her still somewhat rounded stomach. "My baby dies and you think I've healed nicely!"

"Cam, what do you expect me to say?"

Cam slouched back against her pillows, her tears continuing to fall unchecked. "I don't know... that you can make it all better."

"Only time can do that," Sirius said as he picked up his mask. "I'll let Tom know how you're doing."

When he entered the lab, Tom was brewing a potion that Sirius recognized almost immediately. "The familial potion?"

"I have to be certain they aren't keeping my baby from me," Tom said as he stirred the potion several times in an anti-clockwise direction. "How is my wife?"

Sirius only hoped that their side would be able to finish and administer the Abrogo potion, especially with both him and Hermione unavailable. "Upset but in good health."

"Thank you."

A short time later, Tom dripped the potion on to a sheet of parchment, watching as names appeared, showing his two children: Darius and Merry but no third infant. "I'm going to make those bastards pay for this." Straightening up, his face pale, he met Sirius' eyes. "I'll be dealing with the interrogation myself. Come with me."

"You want me to deal with one of them?"

"There is only one," Tom said, his voice taut. "Potter's friend escaped together with some of the captured Aurors. One of the men guarding them confirmed Potter appeared."

"So Potter was the one who hid the body of Lupin," Sirius said, his legs now feeling more than a little rubbery from the relief of finding out that his son had managed to evade capture thanks to Harry.

"He must have, and he dropped the wards surrounding the prisoners, although they didn't all make it out as you no doubt saw."

"I did, although I'm surprised Potter took out all of our men."

"He didn't. They failed me and, so of the ones who did survive Potter's attack, I decided they deserved to meet the other side's fate."

"I didn't get the chance to ask, but how did you breach their defenses?"

"Of course you weren't here when Altus came up with the plan," Tom said and duly explained exactly how they'd managed to gain access to a seemingly unreachable location. "That oaf Hagrid was our way in. Altus had spotted him fiddling with his bars and so I allowed Hagrid to loosen the bars and escape through the wards. We then used a two-way portkey to gain access, a portkey Altus was carrying in his Animagus form. Hagrid was well known for his love of animals and so Altus was easily able to hitch a ride on him in his pocket."

"A clever plan."

"It was," Tom acknowledged as he opened the door to the cells, the sound of screaming reaching their ears. "And speaking of Altus, it seems he's already begun."

Sirius followed Tom into the receiving area where Bill was chained to the wall, his arm at an angle and obviously broken. He was also covered in blood. "It seems he has."

"Has he said anything yet?"

"No, my Lord," Dae said, bowing low to Tom.

"I'm going to take over," Tom said. "You're both dismissed. Altus, I won't need you until Saturday. Renovo, you will take another look at my wife tomorrow."

Both Sirius and Dae bowed low and left the room, Sirius disappearing almost immediately.

On reappearing back at Potter Place, after a brief search, Sirius finally found everyone in the conservatory, including Lucy, who was leaning over Remus. "Is he going to make it?"

Lucy shrugged. "I don't know. He's a bloody mess. I've just had use to the Spark of Life to get his heart going again."

"Merlin, Lucy!" Sirius exclaimed, drawing his wand out and running it over his friend's body. "You could have blown his heart to smithereens. That spell isn't supposed to be used on human beings more than once in a lifetime."

"It was try the spell or call Remus' death – since he's a werewolf I decided to try the spell."

"You've nicked his heart," Sirius said, catching something his colleague had missed. "Damn it to hell – this is not what I needed."

"Will he die?" Neville asked.

"No, but he'll need to be placed on artificial life support while his heart repairs itself." Sirius swiftly began to do what was necessary before sanitizing the area and creating a bubble. "You'll need to monitor him carefully."

Only now did Lucy ask, "How did you know he was still alive? Ron said he was dead... he saw you cast a spell to check on him."

"I didn't. I actually cast a repeat results spell," Sirius said, surprised Lucy hadn't worked it out.

Lucy could have kicked herself. "Of course."

"What is it?" Dudley asked.

Sirius explained it for him. "It's a medical spell used by healers to double-check their findings in case they've missed something. In this case, my wand spat out Hagrid's results and not Remus'."

Sophia was rather horrified by this. "But if Ron and Harry hadn't turned up, you'd have burnt Remus to death."

With the Imperius Potion still inside of him, Sirius would have had to follow orders if Harry hadn't attacked him. "I didn't realize Tom was going to do order me to do that. No-one was more relieved than me when I was blasted away from him."

"Unfortunately we all thought Remus was dead," Lucy said. "I didn't check him because Ron had seen the black cloud of smoke. Justin was attacked when he was laying Remus out."

Sirius now turned his attention to his son, who was lying on a bed close to Remus. "Are you okay?"

A somewhat sleepy Justin nodded. "I got slammed into the wall when werewolf Remus came to and he broke my arm and knocked me out. I've got a concussion but a few more hours and Lucy said I'll be fine."

Sirius was most concerned about the consequences of Remus touching his son. "He didn't infect you?"

"Not as far as we know," Lucy broke in.

"That's a relief," Sirius said, ruffling his son's hair.

Before Sirius could check on Harry, who was in the bed next to Justin, Lucy began to question Sirius about her husband. "How's Bill doing?"

"Not good," Sirius said truthfully. "Tom's taken over his interrogation. I hate to be blunt, Lucy, but I wouldn't hold out much hope for him."

"Why choose him?" Lucy asked, wanting to hear it from Sirius.

"Because I knew he was strong enough to hold up against me," Sirius said, shouldering the blame for Harry's suggestion. "And because I wanted to at least give him a chance."

"A chance that's now gone because Tom is interrogating him," Lucy said in a dull voice.

Rather than checking a bandaged Harry out, Sirius instead reached out to take Lucy's hand, only for her to draw back.

"Don't touch me!"

Hurt flitted across Sirius' face. "It's not my fault – by choosing Bill....."

"It's not that," Lucy interjected, not wanting Sirius to think she was blaming him for the predicament her husband was in. "Remus didn't only attack Justin; he almost ripped out Harry's throat, and in the rush to save Harry's life, I treated Harry without gloves. Unlike Justin, I think there's a good chance I might be infected and if I am, then right now I'm infectious."

"How much worse is this fucking day going to get?" Sirius dropped down to the ground as he realized that Harry's injuries hadn't been acquired during his rescue attempt as he'd initially thought.

Dudley sat down next to him. "Not everyone might have croak... uh, died."

Sirius shook his head. "They all died, Dudley. Tom and his men killed everyone there in retribution for taking Cam and because he believes the baby was a stillborn. I still haven't worked out how Lucy got out or exactly how Harry managed to get Remus back here."

Justin took point for them all. "Then between us we'd better tell you. Lucy had better begin with her escape."

"After your son put the Imperius Curse on me to make me leave, I escaped with Luna and Will by using Justin's broomstick. But we were hit and..." Lucy then broke off, too choked up to go on as she thought about Luna.

"Will?" Sirius immediately asked, worry etching deep lines into his forehead.

"Luna," Neville said quietly.

Hearing this news, Sirius decided to make it easier on everyone. "Rather than making you relive your memories, it would be easier for me to view them. We'll do as Justin suggested and start with Lucy. We can then add memories from whomever as necessary."

After Neville fetched Harry's pensieve, Lucy withdrew a memory. "It starts just after we were hit and the broomstick decided to give up on us..."

Having returned when Justin failed to appear, Ron's memory was the last one Sirius viewed. "And so it was me who got Remus out, leaving Harry behind. But Harry didn't get much of a chance to say exactly what happened after that."

With Harry not available to put his memory into the pensieve, it was Sirius who actually filled in the blank for himself and the others. "I heard someone calling me 'Padfoot' and guessed it was Harry, so I told him to follow me and he was able to communicate with me."

"It was Harry who suggested you choose me, wasn't it?" Justin asked.

Sirius nodded. "Yes. He's also the one who suggested I deal with Sophia. After taking her, of course I knew that Harry was going to help some of the Aurors to escape but as I couldn't intervene and had my back to what was going on, I only know that much."

Justin now took his turn to fill in the blanks. "When some of the guards began to lead me and Bill away, Harry suddenly appeared. Using the diversion, I changed into my Animagus form to get away as I'd have been killed if I'd tried to make it out any other way. Unfortunately Harry was the only one with wands and I saw him throw a spare one to Anna Jameson but some of the men were cut down before she could use it. Harry took out three of the guards before we all spotted Tom coming our way. I saw Harry and the escaping Aurors heading for the ocean and I dove beneath the sand as I was too small to make it to the ocean."

"What exactly is your form?" Dudley asked, having no idea.

Justin went red. "It's embarrassing and I never thought it would be useful until today; I'm an eastern sandfish, a type of sand burrowing skink."

"At least you've got a form," Ron grumbled.

"Back to the subject," Sirius said firmly.

Sophia extracted a memory. "I'd better take it from here."

Her memory covered her rescue, Remus' attack and Lucy's treatment of him up until Sirius walked in. "And that's when you came in."

"I came to find out if Harry had made it safely back as I couldn't see him amongst the dead, and to tell you about Hermione and Kara in case you also hadn't made it."

"You do know that Harry's going to go after them, don't you?" Sophia asked. "He's already said so."

"He'd never let them die," Sirius said, only too well aware of how much Harry still cared for Hermione. "But we can discuss it when Harry comes round."

"So what do we do in the meantime while we wait for Harry to wake up?" Ron asked.

"We try to pick up the pieces," Sirius said. "We need to start by working out who we've lost."

Sophia began by telling them what she knew. "I know there were some people out on holiday or taking a day off, like me. However, all those based at Tabernacle and those helping to prep Barnstable would have been safe, so that would amount to about eighty. But I guess we've lost close to sixty people today, not counting any Unspeakables who might have been on the base. I only know of Remus, myself, Hermione, Kara, and the eight Harry rescued who made it out alive from Seashore."

Sirius was only glad they hadn't lost everyone before saying, "Lucy and I will have to do the certification of the deceased. We can set up a make-shift morgue back at Seashore and then we'll burn the place to the ground. I doubt Jameson will want to return there."

"I agree," Sophia said, the memories of the bodies still fresh in her mind. "And I think I'd better report in."

"I'll come with you," Sirius said, well aware that Anna would want to hear from him firsthand. "Let's go."

Two Days Later

Harry was the first to wake out of him and Remus, and his hand automatically went to his throat.

Sophia grabbed it. "Harry, you're okay. We saved you." She winced as she looked at his neck. "That looks sore. Do you want anything for it?"

"Yeah," Harry said, and then, after taking painkiller, he asked the obvious, given that he could still remember his shock as Remus had reared up from the bed and bitten him. "I'm a werewolf, aren't I?"

"Yes, but at least you're still alive," Justin, who had also been sitting in with Sophia, waiting for his best friend to wake up.

"Are you...?"

Justin shook his head. "No, but Lucy treated you without gloves and she's infected."

"So she's cursed because of me."

"No, she's cursed because of Tom," Sophia said, not about to let Harry take the blame. "And that's not the worse news I have, Harry. Uncle Bill didn't make it. His hand changed last night and Sirius confirmed that Tom had killed him."

"Fuck!" Harry swore, wishing he'd never chosen Bill. "I should never have suggested him."

"But Sirius said he chose him," Sophia said, surprised by Harry's response.

"No, it was me," Harry said, before moving on. "What news of Hermione and Kara?"

Justin relayed what Sirius had told them. "Tom has posted notices everywhere – he'll kill both Hermione and Kara if you don't turn up by Saturday and take their place."

"Then that's what I'm going to have to do."

"Harry, he'll kill you," Justin warned. "Sirius also said that Tom is going to kill them even if you do turn up."

"I thought he might," Harry said. "But I'm still going. At least this way I might have a chance of bargaining with him."

Justin snorted. "How do you expect to bargain with him?"

"With something I half wish Remus had destroyed," Harry said, before he yawned. "I feel terrible."

As Harry's eyes closed and he fell asleep again, Sophia met Justin's gaze. "What does he have to bargain with?"

"I can't tell you," Justin said apologetically. "But I will tell you he's a fool if he goes through with it."

"Then you have to talk him out of it."

"I'll do my best."

However, when Harry came to he was adamant about his idea and, after showering and eating, he disappeared.

Ministry of Magic

Harry hadn't stepped foot in the Ministry of Magic for a very long time, although Tom had opened it back up as a running concern a few years earlier. With civilians and workers alike now gracing its halls, it had taken away a target and Tom knew that.

Looking around, Harry walked over to a desk. "Hello, could you tell Tom I need to see him?"

The guard barely spared Harry a glance. "Tom doesn't take visitors."

"Tell him Harry Potter wants to speak to him."

Now the guard looked up, his wand flying out. "I'll need your wands."

Harry handed them over. "I'll come quietly." Harry was then led off to the cells.

Tom walked into the cell Harry was being held in. "I knew you'd come."

"Release my wife and daughter."

"You don't want to see them before you die?"

Harry did but he was afraid Kara might give the game away by calling him Uncle Harry. If she did, it would come out that Kara's green eyes and dark hair came from her grandmother and not, as some believed, from being Harry's illegitimate daughter. "Not really. I just want an oath from you that they've been released unharmed."

"Did you really think I'd let them go if you came?"

"I was hoping that you were a man of your word."

"Then you're stupider than you look," Tom retorted. "I'm going to kill them both while you watch."

"What if I could offer you something in exchange for their lives?"

Tom gave a scornful laugh. "Such as?"

"I own four artifacts, which when joined together can give their owner an immortal life."

"You're lying."

"Let me have a wand and I'll swear an oath."

"Before you do, you should know that if you use this to kill yourself, then I'll hand your wife to my men to play with and turn your daughter into a Death Eater."

"If I wanted to kill myself, I'd simply have stayed where I was. A wand please."

Tom wasn't stupid and he called Dae into the cell with him. "Keep your wand trained on him. If he makes one wrong move, then kill him." Tom then handed over one of Harry's wands. "Make the oath."

"I, Harry James Potter, swear that I will freely give you four artifacts that can grant you immortal life but only after you release Hermione and Kara unharmed and swear an oath that it has been done."

Tom placed his own wand against his chest. "I, Tom, swear that I will release Hermione if you hand over the artifacts but not your daughter." He lowered his wand and said, "I've decided that I'm going to keep her to make up for the loss of my own daughter when you held my wife in your camp. Kara is going to become a Death Eater and servant to my children."

"I won't give you the artifacts if you do that," Harry threatened.

"Then I'll do as I would have if you'd lied to me. It's your choice." Tom stepped outside. "Renovo, fetch his wife."

When Sirius brought Hermione in with him, she broke free of his grasp and ran towards Harry. "Harry!"

Harry opened his arms as Hermione rushed into them. "It's going to be okay, Hermione. Tom is going to release you."

Hermione lifted up her head to look into Harry's green eyes. "And Kara?"

"He's going to turn her."

Hermione turned around. "No!"

"The choice is yours, Mrs. Potter. Either I keep your daughter or I can kill you both."

Hermione had no choice. "Please don't hurt my baby."

"Then she stays."

Hermione looked up at Harry. "And what about you?"

"Do I need to spell it out?"

Hermione began to cry. "You shouldn't have done it."

"Yes, I should," Harry said as he held Hermione against him. "You and Kara had to come first, Hermione. I love you both too much to let you die in my place."

Hermione clung tightly to Harry. "I love you too, Harry."

Harry set her away from him, and gave her a sad smile. "Hermione, you have to go now."

Tom agreed and snapped his fingers at Sirius. "Take her and then release her unharmed in Muggle London. She can find her own way home from there."

Hermione couldn't stop crying as Sirius led her back up the corridor and disappeared, reappearing in London outside of Potter Place. "I have to go back, Hermione. But I swear I'll make sure that Kara will be okay."

Having to be satisfied with Sirius' answer, Hermione asked about Harry. "Can you help Harry?"

Sirius shook his head. "Tom won't delay this time. He'll execute Harry without fanfare. There's nothing I can do."

Sirius vanished and, still crying, Hermione slowly walked up the steps to pass on the bad news.

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